

# 25 Tips for Making a Successful Career Transition



By Susan Peppercorn

Your career goals at age 20 are different than at 30 and will change again in another decade. Just as our lives change through marriage, the birth of children, the aging of parents, illness, job loss, or moving to a new location, so too do our career needs.

A study by the American Institute of Economic Research, had some good news for would-be career changers in midcareer and beyond.

- 51% of people surveyed said they changed jobs every one to five years from 2016 to 2018.
- A recent Gallup report millennials reveals that 21% of millennials say they've changed jobs within the past year.
- 90% of those who changed careers said their transition was successful.
- 72% said that “emotionally, I feel like a new person” since changing careers, 65% said their stress levels dipped, 68% said it didn't take unreasonably long to find a new job, and 59% reported they are now “following their passions.”

So how do you join them? The study offered a fascinating glimpse into what the successful career changers had in common. Below are 25 tips, gleaned from this research for making a successful transition.

## 1. Assess your skills and strengths

What types of projects do you enjoy? Where do you excel? What do you have to offer to a hiring manager? Answering these questions is the first step in a successful career transition. Make two columns on a piece of paper. In one column list your job knowledge, things such as accounting, editing, social media marketing, engineering, etc. In the second column, list your personal strengths, those personality characteristics that you call on to complete your work successfully. These may include attributes such as problem solving, multi-tasking, tenacity, leadership and communications, to name a few. Creating these lists in writing enables you to clarify your most valuable competencies, and as a result, you will be stronger in your ability to communicate them. People who use their strengths regularly are six times more likely to be engaged and perform better in their jobs. Some resources to help you identify your strengths include the Gallup Strengths Center or the [Values in Action Survey](#).

## 2. Clarify your values

Clarifying what's most important before you launch a job search will help you avoid saying yes to an opportunity that doesn't align with your values. If you have a young family, the flexibility to work at home a few days a week may be more important than a bigger paycheck. Or, working for an organization that places a high value on employee development and collaboration may be high on your list. Surfacing your priorities is worth the time and effort to avoid frustration down the road. The Life Values Inventory is a free online resource to help you prioritize what's most important in your work and life.

## 3. Rediscover your passions

What do you most enjoy doing—in your personal life and work life? Think about the activities, interests, or conversational topics that fascinate and energize you. Your passions make you get out of bed at 6 a.m. on a Saturday morning, or get you talking enthusiastically with others. How do your passions converge with what you do best at work?

“It's amazing how disconnected we become to the things that brought us the most joy in favor of what's practical,” says Rob Levit, an Annapolis, Md.-based creativity expert, speaker and business consultant.

Levit suggests making a list of all the things you remember enjoying as a child. Would you enjoy that activity now? For example, Frank Lloyd Wright, America's greatest architect, played with wooden blocks all through childhood and perhaps well past it.

“Research shows that there is much to be discovered in play, even as adults,” Levit says. Revisit some of the positive activities, and events of childhood. Levit suggests asking yourself these questions to get started: What can be translated and added into your life now? How can those past experiences shape your career choices now?

## 4. Develop a roadmap

You wouldn't drive to a destination without knowing where you're going. Why then would you apply for jobs without a direction? Knowing your destination in a job search is just as important as writing a good resume and sending in applications. Many job seekers waste time applying for postings they read online without investigating their fit for or interest in the hiring organization. Although responding to postings may feel productive, it's the least effective way of finding a job. One way to ensure you have a clear direction is to develop a target list of companies. This list is likely to change as you learn about the companies you are researching. Some organizations will remain attractive, others not. The benefit of having targets is they will keep your search focused.

## 5. Network

Networking is the gold standard when it comes to learning about the business priorities, needs and culture of an organization. Only employees who work for or have worked for a company that you're interested in can tell you what it's like to work there. Web sites and job descriptions can only say so much. The goal of networking is to gather information to determine the following:

- Am I interested in this company?
- What problems could I help them solve?
- What are the opportunities and challenges that I see?
- What role or function is the best fit for my skills and strengths?

Networking is not about asking for a job. Optimal networking will result in your ability to clarify your target list of employers, define your competencies, and communicate your value. Below are some questions to consider asking a networking contact:

- I'm here to learn about your industry; what's it like to work in this industry and how did you make the transition?
- What skills and capabilities are valued most in your industry or by your company?
- What professional associations or publications will help me learn more about the industry?
- Who else do you recommend I talk with?
- How can I help you?

Always send a thank you email after a networking meeting recapping what you learned, and thanking your contact for any introductions they promised to make. For more tips on networking, here's a great article from the NY Times — [How not to be a networking leech](#).

## 6. Cultivate your unique brand

What was once called a reputation is now called a brand. If you don't define your brand, others will; not necessarily the way you want. Your job search is a sales campaign, and you are the product and service. If you think of your career search as a campaign, your launch must ensure your product is clearly defined, with enough distinctive features to differentiate you from others.

Branding is the process by which you consistently draw attention to the ways your skills, strengths and accomplishments are unique. Keeping your message consistent and visible in all you say, do, and write is what constitutes a brand. Think of it as telling your story in the way you want to be seen in your target industry.

What problems can you solve for a prospective employer? Are you good at building and motivating teams? Do you excel at designing products or marketing programs? What do you have to offer that's unique? Success in making a career transition relies on your ability to match your skills and abilities to the needs of your target employers.

To start developing your brand, identify 3 or 4 adjectives that best describe the value you offer. Once you pinpoint what you feel are the right kinds of words, it's a good idea to consult a thesaurus. Here are some possibilities, but don't limit yourself to these:

*Collaborative, resilient, forward-focused, collaborative, persistent, visionary, diplomatic, intuitive, detail-oriented, enterprising, ethical, genuine, accessible.*

## **7. Be a detective**

It's natural to want to apply for jobs as soon as you decide to make a career transition. The downside to not learning about the organization's needs before you press the send button is that you have no way of knowing if you've positioned yourself in a way that will catch the attention of the recruiter or hiring manager. Once you develop a target list of potential employers (step 1), truly research their businesses. It will make you a stronger candidate.

When conducting company research make sure to review a company's website, blog, social channels, and recent press. Additionally, if the company is public, take the time to read through their 10k report as it can provide great background on their strategic direction. The Vault and Glassdoor can also be great resources for further company research. And, don't forget to talk with current or former employees.

## **8. Tailor your resume to the role with an effective summary**

Many people assume that once you write or update your resume it's done. Nothing can be further from the truth. In order to attract attention of a recruiter or hiring manager, you need to take the time to customize your resume to a particular role by including a summary section. Why? Because, the average time spent reading a resume is fifteen seconds. The more work the recruiter has to do to determine if you're a good fit, the less likely they are to keep reading.

A resume summary **should** look like this:

**Cancer biologist** with expertise in basic and translational research focused on target discovery and program leadership. Ability to manage complex research projects and develop integrated, and effective target discovery teams. Competencies include:

**Leadership:** Broad experience supervising, mentoring and training scientists. Led interdisciplinary teams and colleagues to exceed expectations and deliver excellence.

**Project Management:** Designed, implemented and managed cancer target discovery programs. Led programs with internal (Dana-Farber) and external collaborators (Novartis) resulting in successful project progression with high impact results in target discovery and in vivo proof of concept. Project laid the foundation for a drug combination trial in humans for breast cancer.

The summary section should take up approximately the first third of a page followed by the traditional reverse chronological section.

## 9. Use keywords

When you apply online, your resume passes through an automated tracking system (ATS) where it is screened by software before it reaches human hands. The ATS evaluates your resume for the keywords and phrases that are used to describe the responsibilities and qualifications in the job description. If your resume does not include these keywords, it will not make it through the screening process and will be eliminated. To ensure this doesn't happen, read the job description carefully before submitting your resume and incorporate the keywords that accurately represent the skills and experience you possess.

## 10. Limit online applications

Online applications are the black hole of job searching. On the surface applying to postings appears to be the most efficient way to find a job. The reality is that more than 70% of the time, applicants never get called for an interview, and never receive a response except for an automated reply. Job listings on career and employer sites are a great way to discover open roles, but blindly submitting your resume and cover letter to all job postings you find will likely not get you hired. The job search isn't a numbers game. You will be much more successful if before applying you take the time to network with current employees, research the company, and tailor your cover letter and resume for the position. Your research and networking will help you stand out by demonstrating your interest and passion for the company or role.

## **11. Don't rely on cover letters**

Many job seekers assume that the cover letter is your opportunity to target your message to the needs outlined in a job description. The conundrum is that 75% of the time, cover letters don't get read. You should always submit a cover letter along with your resume, but you can't rely on them. Customizing the summary section of your resume is critical to getting your targeted message across in the event the cover letter is tossed.

## **12. Stay optimistic**

Job searching is not for the faint of heart. It clearly has its ups and downs. Sometimes you hear back after an interview, sometimes you don't. Networking contacts don't always respond when we hope they will. If you find yourself feeling tired or down, change the channel so to speak. Take some time to do something that lifts your spirits like listening to music, going for a walk or taking a class at the gym.

## **13. Keep up with former colleagues**

Don't let your old network drift away. Jobs and careers change and you don't want to find yourself in a job search trying to connect with people you lost touch with years ago. There's nothing more annoying than getting an email from someone you haven't spoken with in years who tells you they are looking for a job and would love your help. Make plans to have lunch or coffee with former colleagues twice a month and use Facebook or LinkedIn notices as a way to reconnect.

## **14. Focus on your image**

Like it or not, we are judged largely by appearance. A good headshot is worth its weight in gold when it comes to online profiles. The best headshots project energy and enthusiasm. If you haven't bought new work clothes since the Clinton administration, you might also consider investing in a wardrobe overhaul. Your clothes may be dating you, which could lead people to make assumptions that your skills are also behind the times. Invest in a professional headshot to use on LinkedIn and other social media.

## **15. Get LinkedIn savvy**

LinkedIn is an invaluable tool to find and contact important networking connections. With more than 700M users, worldwide, it has become the go-to source for business networking. It also offers information on your target companies, job openings and industry news.

Leaving your LinkedIn profile sparsely completed is like going on a job interview in gym clothes. Put differently, your LinkedIn profile enables you to market your competencies and value so that hiring managers and recruiters can find you. If you don't complete your summary as thoroughly as possible, you are not maximizing this valuable opportunity to be seen and found. A complete LinkedIn summary includes a photo, descriptive headline, summary, chronological experience including accomplishments and education.

## 16. Share your knowledge

Sharing your expertise is a great way to distinguish yourself from your job-seeking competition. Advances in social media have made this much easier than in the past. Platforms such as LinkedIn Pulse enable you to publish blogs without the need for a dedicated site. A well-written post can catch the attention of a hiring manager in a way that a resume will never do. Do you know about marketing analytics, customer service, program management or building customer relationships? Share your knowledge with a well-written blog. You never know whose attention you'll catch.

## 17. Give back

Volunteering is an excellent way to give back and expand your network at the same time. Giving to others whose needs are greater than your own helps you see the bigger picture and realize that your situation may not be that bad. Look for ways to volunteer, serve on nonprofit boards or get involved in public service to share your expertise with others.

## 18. Be a mentor

Having learned many lessons through trial and error, you can now pass that knowledge on to younger generations by serving as a mentor. This can help you make a contribution to the next generation but good mentoring also works both ways—your mentee may be the one who teaches you to Tweet. Talk to your HR department, professional organization or college alumni association to find out what opportunities exist.

## 19. Send thank you notes

Sending a thank you note may seem unnecessary, but it can often make a difference. Within 24 hours after every networking chat or interview, you should send a detailed and thoughtful thank you note. Even if you aren't interested in the company or role, a timely thank you note demonstrates professionalism and respect. Sometimes a company will wait to move forward with a candidate until after receiving a thank you note even if they promised to follow-up.

## 20. Check, check and check again

The job process can be stressful, and it can often feel like you need to rush so that you don't miss out on an opportunity. It is in this rush that the most common mistakes occur, such as spelling, inserting the wrong company name or sending an old version of a resume. While it might not seem like a big deal, companies will notice. These small errors can often be a quick deal breaker. To avoid these easy mistakes, take a deep breath, slow down and read over everything before you send it.



## **21. Don't set artificial deadlines**

When there is a significant life event, such as graduating from school, having a child or moving, it is common to want your job search to align with the timing of that event. While staying motivated and having a goal is important, these “deadlines” can hurt your prospects. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the job search usually takes 10.8 weeks with 58% of job seekers finding a job in less than 14 weeks. However, if you set a deadline, and the job search takes longer than expected, it is easy to get discouraged. Frustration is your worst enemy in the job search process as it makes you more likely to commit all of the common blunders above.

## **22. Focus on potential, not title**

A vice president title at one company may be called a director in another organization. Don't fall into the trap of focusing on the highest level. Instead, look at the responsibilities of the position and culture of the company. Will you have the opportunity to learn new skills? Is the environment collaborative? How much autonomy will you have to get things done? Evaluate a new job based on your ability to learn and grow, not only the title.

## **23. Be open to change**

Anyone who worked in financial services, journalism or high technology over the last decade has seen rapid, head-spinning change. The forces leading to the seismic shifts in these industries are different, but the change has been, is, and will continue to be so fast that professionals in those industries need to manage these risks by being open to change. The risks that the job that you love changes, that your boss leaves or that your company is sold can be mitigated by not staying stagnant. Pay attention to these dynamics by keeping your skills up-to-date and your network fresh.

## **24. Set small goals**

A successful job or career transition is the result of many small steps. Just like losing 50 pounds happens by losing a pound or two a week, so too, a job transition is about achieving interim goals like writing a resume, targeting your audience, building your brand and networking. It's important to divide the larger goal of getting a new job into manageable steps. Doing so will help you from feeling overwhelmed.

## **25. Celebrate your accomplishments**

A job search or career transition can take months and maintaining optimism throughout can be challenging when the end is not clearly in sight. An effective way to stay motivated is to notice your accomplishments along your journey to finding a new position. Each of these successes builds on each other and will lead to your ultimate success. As noted above, updating your resume, developing a social media presence, attending networking events and applying for jobs take significant work and achieving each is a cause for celebration.