

## Out of the comfort zone

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By VICKI JAYNE

There are the thirty-somethings who find they have caught the wrong career train and want off; the forty-somethings sitting on a solid career base that seems to have lost its meaning; or the fifty-somethings who realise traditional retirement has become a receding mirage and can't face another 20 years at the same old coalface.

These days the mid-life career crisis can happen any time, says Lee Brodie president of the Career Practitioners Association.

"We've become so used to the notion of change, adaptation and adjustment that people aren't waiting for a mid-life crisis to happen," Brodie says. "Even the generation of youngsters coming into the workforce now are starting with the belief that nothing is going to be stable and predictable, so they're portfolio workers [a term for those with several occupational options] from day one."

Many older people are changing their job or work emphasis to achieve a better work-life balance; others are pushed by redundancy or prompted by life changes to make major shifts, says Brodie.

The stressed, restless or just plain bored are increasingly looking at their workplace and asking "is this all there is?"

There are inspiring stories of people who've abandoned jobs to pursue a passion; turned hobbies into a small businesses or swapped financial reward for lifestyle.

But just how easy is it to make a mid-life career change? What are the pitfalls?

"I think problems happen when people aren't clear about what they really want," says Frances Harre, senior counsellor at Career & Business Designs.

"They get sick of one thing and have a stab at something else rather than carefully constructing something that is the right fit for them."

Alison Morgan, for instance, wasn't sure what was missing from her job as a health researcher when she first went to career counselling with Harre.

"I guess I was a bit bored. Because I'd already done a couple of degrees, I thought about doing more study but I wasn't sure where it was leading.

Today, she's still in the same line of work but no longer bored. Instead, she's reduced her hours and has just finished the first draft of her first novel.

"I did that in eight months which is exciting - though I think the re-write will probably take as long."

And she's realistic that writing is not exactly a financial winner.

"Whether I get published or not is in some ways a bit of a side issue - though it is the main goal at some point. But when I finish this [crime novel], I'll do another because I'm learning the craft.

"The thing is I wanted something more creative, and really enjoy the process. It just seems to flow. And I can do it because I'm still working."

Her primary occupation could also be called a work in progress. Now 46, Morgan has already made a few career adjustments, moving from nursing into a more corporate role in the health sector. Along the way, she's also picked up Bachelor, then Master of Arts degrees and a diploma in business.

Now she's also made the leap from salaried worker to self-employed consultant.

"That's a bit scary but I'm mostly doing short-term project work anyway and some have come up where it would be easier to employ me as a contractor. So I've just taken the plunge and gone independent.

"I know what I need to survive, money-wise. The thing is that nothing is forever these days. Even in conventional jobs, restructuring is more common. I have lots of skills so, if it doesn't work out, I'll move to something else. You have to jump into it with faith."

Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to a career change is overcoming the mindset that keeps people in their comfort zone, says Harre.

"A lot of people feel trapped in a box - particularly if they've been really successful in one particular area. They think they'll never regain that lead somewhere else.

"What we do is help people shift mindset from status quo to possibility.

The idea is to admit any possibility rather than screening them through the "can't do that because" filters that people usually apply, she adds.

To possibility, you need to add intent: once you see where you'd like to be, structure a three- to five-year plan to get there and, importantly, enjoy the journey.

"It's not just a matter of moving from one point to another but lifelong development and learning," says Harre. "Often the changes people make aren't dramatic."

Some find new possibilities in the present workplace. Her husband Max is a good example. A few years ago, he was putting in long hours as a senior manager at Waitakere City Council, couldn't see an alternative but couldn't bear the thought of doing it for another 20 years. He's still working a six-day week, but only three of them at Waitakere and he's getting a buzz out of it.

"I guess the first step was talking about what needed to change. There were several things keeping me in that lifestyle - a large mortgage, the belief that my management would never let me go part-time. So it was a matter of systematically addressing each of the barriers," says Max Harre.

The easiest way to stop doing something you don't like is to have a compelling alternative, his says. His was the dream of running a business with his wife, which is what he now does for three days a week. But only after the obstacles were addressed.

"The first thing was changing our financial situation."

The Titirangi house with its spectacular views was sold and initially the Harres moved to rental accommodation. That, says Max, was pretty awful. But it created the space to make other changes.

He explored going part-time at work and that barrier also fell as he moved from line management into a policy analyst role. A few years later, he and Frances are home-owners again, in a Titirangi house renovated to suit their new business.

One of the things they do is run training programmes for people starting niche businesses.

This ties neatly in with Max's council role, which involves policy development in relation to small business. "So there's a whole beneficial overlap and it's not by accident," he says. "I don't believe in accidents. I believe in people making

lots of little decisions on the way to achieving what they really want to be doing."

Anne Fulton would agree. A psychologist who runs a business called Career Analysis, she says successful career transition is a matter of incremental change.

"Instead of having to leap off a cliff, there are a whole lot of baby steps people can take that enable them to make those shifts."

Those steps, she says, provide a sense of momentum.

"In a sense, they are living the dream now, even though they may still be in the same work role. Then by the time they've done all the preparatory work, making the big step will be a lot easier."

Three areas to focus on, says Fulton, are skills (what they have and need), knowledge (what's needed for a successful transition) and networks (who can help or support the shift).

Often those wanting to make a shift have to overcome resistance from family or colleagues, as well as their own fears. But perhaps the biggest hurdle is to take your own need for change seriously.

"I think the hardest thing is just doing it - getting over that 'will I, won't I' weighing of the consequences," says Morgan.

"You just have to do it and see what happens because you won't know until you actually try."

### **NZ's fluid workforce**

\* On average, people in the working population have had 3.6 jobs in the past 10 years.

\* Less than one in five ended the decade working for the employer they started with.

\* Only two out of five ended the decade working in the same general career area.

(From *The New Careers - Individual action and Economic Change*, Kerr, Inkson & Pringle, 1999, Sage Publications.)