

SWEET SPOT CAREERS

SWEET SPOT CAREERS

A PRACTICAL AND CREATIVE GUIDE
TO A SUCCESSFUL MIDLIFE
CAREER TRANSITION

BY **MARIA SIMONELLI**

ISBN: 978-0-646-91372-8

Copyright © 2013 Maria Simonelli

www.careerredesign.com.au

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.

First Edition 2013

Simonelli, Maria

Sweet Spot Careers: A Practical and Creative Guide
to a Successful Midlife Career Transition

Cover design and typesetting: Sean Walsh Graphic Design

Printing by Excite Print

Acknowledgements

The impetus for this book came from participants of the Career Redesign Program. I thank them, the focus group participants and all of the blog readers for their thoughts and questions that have shaped both the program and this book.

Equally I thank the interviewees who generously shared their insights and stories about their own career transitions.

I also acknowledge the Key Person of Influence program mentors who provided momentum and advice on all aspects of the writing and publishing process.

I'd also like to express my gratitude to the many authors referenced in this book and their often groundbreaking work in their chosen fields. They have provided me with great inspiration in my own career transition journey.

Dedication

For my parents, Antonia and Domenico, who made difficult life choices so that I wouldn't need to make as many.

CONTENTS

Introduction

We can't redesign the past, but we can learn from it.....	13
Who is this book written for?.....	15
What to expect in this book.....	15
How to use this book.....	16

Part 1: Seeking Clarity

Chapter 1: Why we need change

What is the single biggest career change myth?.....	21
Finding your career sweet spot	22
Reflection – Finding your career sweet spot	23
How do you know you're ready for a career change?	24
Reflection – How do you know you're ready?	25
Taking it personally	25
Exposing the myths and mind games in career change	26
Reflection – What are your inner stories?	27
What else do we do to sabotage our career change?	28
Is your self-esteem holding you back from a career change?.....	29
Changing careers means changing ourselves.....	30
Reflection – It's okay to want a career change	31

Chapter 2 Creating a foundation to understand change

What has being creative got to do with career transition?.....	34
Creativity is expressed in many ways	34
Breakthrough Thinking = Breakthrough Behaviour.....	36
How do we find flow in our work?	37
The important authors that have influenced this book	38
The psychology of midlife career transition	40
Reflection – Can you identify with a midlife transition phase?.....	41
The dimensions of life change and an introduction to the seven creative skills	43
Reflection – Where are you in your life change process?	46
The seven creative skills and behaviours	50
Reflection on the Chapter's foundation approach	53
Case Study – Finding strength from change	54

Part 2: Self-Reflection as a means to get to know yourself

Chapter 3: Get ready to know you

Applying the creative elements to the reflective activities through preparation	58
Which career change category are you in?.....	60
Applying the creative elements to the reflective activities through seeing	61
The D.A.T.A Model.....	63
Case Study: Matching lifestyle with career.....	64

Chapter 4: Activities Section – Exploring our past and present to inform the future

Your source of D.A.T.A – Desire	68
Activity – Create a lifeline.....	70
Activity – Describe the events from your lifeline	70
Activity – What are your defining moments?.....	72
Activity – Internal locus of control	72
Activity – What’s motivating you?.....	73
Activity – The envy method.....	74
Activity – What do you stand for?.....	74
Activity – Just imagine a universe where.....	75
Activity – An ideal typical day in two years from now.....	76
What does work mean to you?.....	77
Reflection – What role does work play in your life today?.....	78
Check in point using the creative element seeing as your guide.....	79
Your source of D.A.T.A – Abilities.....	80
Exploring our natural talents.....	81
Activity – Discover your natural talents.....	82
Activity – What roles appeal?	83
Check in point using the creative element seeing as your guide.....	84
Your source of D.A.T.A – Temperament.....	85
What types of activities suit your temperament?.....	86
The relationship between careers, environment and personality	87
Reflection – How do you see yourself?	89
Activity – What activities suit you?.....	90
Holland’s Six Personality Types	91
Activity – What type of environment do you want?.....	92
Check in point using the creative element seeing as your guide.....	93

Your source of D.A.T.A – Assets	93
Activity – Create your ideal job description	94
Activity – Your story.....	95
Review your D.A.T.A.....	95
Activity – What themes are emerging?	96
Activity – Where are you at now?.....	96
What is the value of personality tests?.....	97
Working out what you're good at by considering learning styles.....	98
Kolb's experiential learning theory (learning styles) model.....	99
Another learning style model through VARK.....	102
Reflection – What's your preferred learning style?.....	103

Part 3: So what's stopping you?

Chapter 5: Managing the transition

Change is not the same as transition	107
What exactly is transition?.....	108
Create an internal transition plan	111
Reflection – Are you ready to create an internal transition plan?.....	113
Reflect on the 4 Dimensions of Life Change Model.....	113
Activity – Start thinking about transition	114
Tips to free up your time.....	115
Reflection – Transitions can be unsettling	116
Case Study – Skills transition.....	117

Chapter 6: It's time to overcome the inhibitors and embrace the challenges

Applying creative elements – embracing uncertainty and risk-taking	119
Yes, But.....	120
Does your mindset have anything to do with how you'll approach your career redesign?	120
Activity – Myths and mind games	121
Are you too old?.....	122
Change without risk is impossible	122
Reflection – What keeps you up at night?	123
Why are we afraid of change?	124
What approaches do you use now to manage risk?.....	124
Activity – Assessing risk and fear.....	125
What is the cost of your career change?.....	126
Case Study – From auto pilot to successful consultant.....	128

Activity – Risky business	129
How being vulnerable can help your career.....	130
Check in point using the creative elements embracing uncertainty and risk taking as your guide	132
Assessing your own Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT).....	133
Case study – Change is messy, but you’re worth it	134
Why people fail	135

Part 4: Time for action

Chapter 7: The single most important thing you can do right now

Applying the creative elements of collaboration and context.	145
Commence your ‘dipping’ in experimental approach through collaboration.....	146
What will enable you to take action now?.....	147
Find your tribe	147
Reflection – Connecting with your tribe	148
Time to expand your network	149
Activity – How comfortable are you talking to strangers?	150
Check in point using the creative element context as your guide	150
Networking protocol tips.....	151
Check in point using the creative element collaboration as your guide	152
The benefits of talking to strangers.....	152
Case Study – From transport planner to corporate trainer to professional communication consultant.....	153
So what’s the unique value that you are offering?	154
Activity – Create a personal profile	155
Branding tips	156
Case Study – From fashion to fitness	157
What’s my identity got to do with transition? The perspective of a woman from the baby boomer generation	159
Creating new rules for success.....	161

Chapter 8: Putting the strategies to work

Applying the creative element using discipline.....	165
Start with a side project.....	165
Being experimental – the ‘what if’ scenario	166
The bespoke career	168
Building a portfolio career.....	168

D.A.T.A checklist for a portfolio career	170
Activity – Taking stock.....	171
Still not ready to jump? Try this interim approach: Happiness Advantage or “love the one you’re with”	173
Are you closer to finding your career sweet spot?.....	177
Reflection – Where are you at now?.....	177
Activity – Create an Initial Action Plan	179
Activity – Career Redesign Annual Plan.....	180
Activity – One Page Action Plan	181
Check in point using the creative element discipline as your guide	182
Final time for reflection	183
Make the most of the amazing opportunity change presents	183
Appendix.....	185
Chapter Notes	187
References	193

INTRODUCTION

We can't redesign the past, but we can learn from it

It's interesting that in a time when we have so much, so many opportunities, so many ways to create a meaningful and rewarding career, we find that nearly half of those surveyed in western countries (UK, US, Australia) say they are in jobs they would trade today if they could. In Australia, job dissatisfaction has hit an all time record high with more than 80% of workers considering changing jobs during 2010-11.¹

The modern workplace is afflicted with two career dilemmas – a plague of job dissatisfaction and the related uncertainty about how to choose the 'perfect' career.

Many of us who started our professional life in the 1970-80's were still under the impression we would have a job for life, working in the same company or in the government sector or, at least, the same profession for most of our working lives.

But gone is the job for life with its planned career structure and progressive status and income rise as we moved up through the ranks.

Generation Y and X are quite familiar with shorter job tenures in the age of contracts and reduced permanency. But baby boomers, who are well into their mid-lives, are learning that to stay employable they need to expand their skills set through a commitment to lifelong learning. They are seeking to create careers that ensure they can buffer another Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the resulting corporate and government redundancies.

I recall the lack of advice I received and the frightfully ill-informed way I made my career choice in the late 1970's. There was no career counsellor in the secondary school I attended and in the end I fell into my career choice.

Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for my secondary education and the role the teachers played in giving me a sense of social justice and the value of public service. Those were formative years that, in the

“The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but it is too low and we reach it.”

Attributed to Michelangelo

end, would influence my decisions about moving into an environmental science course and teaching degree. This eventually led to working across the public sector in local, state and federal governments and a longer period with the non-profit sector.

And I'm even more grateful that my post-war migrant parents had the foresight and commitment to ensure that all their children finished secondary school and had at least one degree to their name.

While I didn't think I came from a family of high achievers, now I observe my siblings and I all have at least two degrees each and are constantly sourcing further education opportunities. Unusual when I observe how many of my counterparts at that time didn't finish secondary school, married young and chose to forgo a career. These were choices they made at the time based on advice they were given, but I wonder about the options they were not introduced to.

It's even more interesting to think how much has changed in just one generation for women. The lack of choice my mother had in her life, let alone her career, is quite astounding. By her midlife she had lived through a depression and war, migrated and had four children that survived to adulthood. Plus she worked as a seamstress to bring extra money in. Not by choice but by necessity. There were no discussions about meaningful careers with her mother.

So why now is choosing a fulfilling career such a challenge and why does it come with so much pressure?

I have little doubt, that for some, a reluctance to change careers is linked to the amount of investment they've made in an university education. The cost of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, must weigh on people's choices, particularly those in their thirties who may have managed to pay off their university debts.

Similarly for those who have spent years climbing up the corporate or public service ranks, only then to realise that they don't want to be in these roles either due to the pressures, the nature of the roles or the lack of work-life choices this creates. These dilemmas can hardly be reassuring in times of retrenchment, restructures and a further potential GFC.

I suspect the difficulty is enhanced further by the options open to us, but this additional choice can lead to paralysis rather than action.

It's clear that we are not alone in this dilemma. For many professionals in their midlife, their dilemma is intensified as they reflect on their career choice and investment to date and again get stuck worried about not making the right choice again.

So where does this leave you, the reader, now? With the gift of living in a First World country, but with the legacy of past choices and with a myriad of future choices.

Who is this book written for?

This book is written for people who are either in their midlife or mid-career who are ready to make an informed and conscious career choice about how to spend their remaining twenty plus working years.

- Emotionally they could be feeling stuck, unfulfilled and unsatisfied with current circumstances;
- Intellectually they could feel they have more to offer and they are not using their best skills or natural talents;
- Practically they could be returning to work after prioritising their family, facing redundancy or unemployment;
- Financially they can either be in a place where they want to work part-time and have a portfolio career, or need to gain greater rewards from employment.²

So, either by fear or necessity, this has led them to be highly motivated and willing to put the effort into planning the next stage of their career.

The aim is to assist you, the reader, to consider what is possible and to

- Understand yourself and figure out what you want and what you have to offer the marketplace;
- Listen to yourself and understand why you are not taking action;
- Become proactive and act.

My hope is that by actively managing your midlife career, you will feel more in control, see the benefit of the many suggestions in this book and create a plan that you will progressively act on.

What to expect in this book

In researching this book I was overwhelmed by the number of career advice references in the market. This challenged me to find what value I could add to this important topic. There are many 'how to' books out there about career change and I have gained ideas and inspiration from them.

As a result I have created a book that I would have wanted to read

through my many career transitions. It is full of effective activities, balanced with research based theory and combined with a creative approach, to assist the reader to have breakthrough moments to begin the transition and maintain the impetus for change.

It also shares methods, reading and advice that has assisted me to work through my own fears, be clear about my goals and undertake safe but still inspiring career transitions.

It shares the thinking of experienced authors in a variety of related fields including careers, psychology, financial management and personal growth, that provide both a foundation and validity to many of the experiences and feelings you may be experiencing.

It's also full of reflections from others who have been through their midlife or mid-career change, survived the transition and are able to share with the reader what they learnt from taking the plunge.

And finally there is realistic advice on how to redesign your careers in such a way as to sustain you emotionally, intellectually and financially.

How to use this book

I'm a big fan of the left brain/right brain types of thinking when problem solving. This book is made up of left brain logical and objective theory as well as right brain intuitive, creative and reflective activities.

This book is firstly a manual, to assist you to find the core elements of a fulfilling career, work out what are you actually looking for and what are the pay-offs and choices you'll make to achieve this.

The methodology is easy to follow and is translated into a 4-step process that

- Starts with self-reflection to get clarity on why we seek change,
- Identifies risks, challenges and fears and how we can overcome these,
- Identifies enablers that we have access to now or can pull into our lives to support us,
- Assists to create a strategy to set priorities and create a plan to move into action.

The book is divided into 4 parts:

In Part 1, Clarity, Chapters 1-2 look at the links between psychology and decision making that underlie the transition process.

The book's framework, that guides participants throughout the entire process, is built on an understanding of the psychology behind midlife transition and the dimensions of life change.

It also introduces how we can apply creativity to the transition process.

All the theory in the world makes no difference if we don't act. The foundation of the book is to encourage the reader to use your innate creative skills, undertaking activities that can assist to answer the questions posed in a manner that helps us stay motivated.

Part 2 is about self-reflection to help you to get to know yourself better.

Chapters 3-4 outline a series of self-directed activities to enable the reader to work out what is driving them and translate the theory into action. These chapters come at the issues of 'why I need to change' and 'what am I looking for?' from a number of entry points that assist to align core values, passion, driving beliefs, abilities and skills with how to create supportive environments.

In Part 3, Chapters 5-6 introduce strategies to reduce risk, fear and uncertainty by identifying the blocks to career transition.

Transitions are by nature unsettling so a key to managing risk is to first identify how we currently prepare and approach this area. There are many strategies introduced that assist us to manage this so we are not overwhelmed into inaction.

Part 4, Chapters 7-8, identifies enablers that support transition.

The career transition club is a big one and the key is to tap into these groups. These chapters point to the vast array of collaboration tools and avenues that make use of their 'community of interest', networking, online forums both formal and informal, that all point to how we can create viable and supportive next steps.

The key is to pull this all together into a plan. While we all recognise that we may not be able to plan the whole journey, we can start the initial next steps by creating a personal action plan.

By working out where we've been and what pain points we need to address that could be stopping us, we can identify what will support us to move forward. Then we can start to map out the important next steps and build confidence to take action.

A final bit of advice...

My suggestion is to read the book in the order of the chapters and then go back and dip into sections that have resonated for you. Have a go at each of the activities, but if they don't work for you, then leave

them and return to them at a later date.

I have included a variety of activities to help you find the ones that will help unlock hidden ideas or at least bring them further to the surface.

This book is not trying to represent career change as an easy stepwise process. If a career change were easy you would have found the resources to make the change by now. I also don't think that there is one way to 'do a career change'.

What I do know is that a key to redesigning your career is the degree of motivation you apply to the process. I'm convinced that if you want something it will show up in what you put into it. Your success depends as much on your own continued motivation and energy as it does on other internal factors or external forces. That means applying the advice, trying on new behaviours and stretching in sometimes uncomfortable ways.

What I've created is the book I would have liked to have read to help me understand the cycles of midlife, the emotions of fear about change, some clues to help get through the transition with one overriding message: go with it, you'll be okay and above all don't over think it, just ensure you act.

I hope this book leaves the reader feeling empowered, confident and ready to do whatever it takes to re-energise their career and find that sweet spot.