

WHAT TO THINK THROUGH BEFORE SWITCHING JOBS



Summary: *Switching jobs is a major life event and should be done very carefully. Here's what you need to think about before you make the switch.*

Messages urging us to change careers are all around us:

- "Re-invent yourself!"
- "The long-cycle career path is dead; your only job security is the ability to [find a new job effectively and quickly](#)."
- "To advance your career, you have to shift jobs, industries, even sectors, over and over again."
- "Change is constant, change is necessary, change is good!"

So what should you do if you get that powerful urge to jump ship, change direction, start over or realign your satisfactions? In many cases, the best advice is: Don't. Instead, slow down, take stock and beware the perils of magical thinking.

Magical thinking is believing that things will happen simply because we want them to. It's misjudging factors that affect what's possible, as well as mistaking our motives, dreams and ability to attain our goals. Magical thinking leads us to overreact to temporary discomforts or turn up the volume on the mythical siren songs of a new career. It leads us to overestimate the desirability of a new career while underestimating the difficulty of attaining one.

Don't Bet the Farm

Magical thinking may lead us to believe that our work life will be great if we can only eliminate its undesirable aspects. Although it would be nice to avoid all the noxious stimuli in our lives, let's be clear: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore" isn't a sound [career-development strategy](#). Don't bet the farm -- your economic future, stability, reputation, self-esteem, advancement and family responsibilities -- solely on the premise that "anything would be better than this." That wonderful rush of control you feel when you make an abrupt decision to "bag this @#%&! job so that I can get on with my life" is short-lived and often damaging to your future career leverage.

Spotting Magical Thinking

Watch out for the most common rah-rah motivational myth: You can be anything you want, any time you want. Sorry, but this simply isn't true. Careers develop and ripen over time. Even if you could "re-credential" yourself with shiny new skills, the job market usually values experience more than expertise. Career-shifters are, by definition, going to be inexperienced in their new field.

A lot of magical thinkers buy into the "jump-shift fallacy" -- the belief that you can pull off a quantum change in your career in one, neat simple step: "I'll leave my job as a librarian on Friday, and on Monday I'll start my new life as a programmer in Linux." You should view your career change as a transition, not an instantaneous transformation. Transitions require time and planning and consist of a sequence of logical steps, each having a cause, effect and realistic time frame. Of course, you don't have to plan so rigidly that you can't respond to expected opportunity. Flexibility and adaptability are highly desirable traits these days. However, remember the truth in the maxim, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."

[Successful career changers](#) often pursue complementary or parallel agendas. For example, taking courses to become fully computer-literate can make you more valuable to your present employer and reduce the risk of being laid off. Meanwhile, you can investigate new fields or industries, develop contacts to help you facilitate your transition and search for interim projects to develop or demonstrate your newly minted computer skills. After these foundations are laid, you can shift emphasis gradually from one foot to another, from the old role to the new identity. When you finally lift all your weight off the old foot, the other leg is ready to take the load.

The Evil Stepsisters

The jump-shift fallacy has two common companions. The first is the "honor your impulse" principle ("Just do it!"). A better slogan for career changers might be "When you're ready, do it. But don't do it before you're ready." Think through what the "it" really is. "It" also can mean developing an employment database, or participating more actively in professional organizations in your desired field. In short, "doing it" means having the resolve to begin a controlled career transition, not leaping blindly off a cliff.

Be equally wary of the this-won't-take-long assumption. Career shifts can take up to 10 times longer than linear job shifts, so consider whether you'll need a savings cushion or a stop-loss job while pursuing your new vocation. When you decide to take on an untried, untested career identity, you become an employment risk -- particularly if you're in mid-career or have an established record in your existing field. The job market assumes that people usually don't change work roles unless something has gone wrong, so self-initiated career changes are alarming: Are you running toward something ... or away from something?

Magical thinking also often causes career changers to overestimate their earning potential. When magical thinkers say they'll "take a step back financially to get into a satisfying role," they're usually thinking about a 10% to 15% pay cut. Suggest a 60% to 70% drop in earning power, and career priorities may do an abrupt about-face.

Don't fall into the trap of trying one thing after another, kissing frog after frog in the hope one will turn into a prince. And if you attempt to hedge your bets by "trying on" several directions at once, you risk appearing naive, unfocused or uncommitted. Remember, too, that if your new direction doesn't work out, you may find your previous calling unreceptive to your return.

Curbing the Urge

Careful planning, research and methodical reality testing are ways to diminish the risk of a career change. The following four steps will help you to evaluate whether your shift is really the best move for you or just wishful thinking.

Slow down and cool down. Balance emotion with reason, and let your overreactions to workplace negatives simmer down before you act. Analyze events and your reactions to them in writing.

Conduct thorough research. Information is the enemy of impulse. Wade into the Web. Network with people who have attempted similar moves. Read compensation studies. Distinguish between fundamental satisfiers and transitory needs, which may be valid and important, but not necessarily permanent. Be prepared for your priorities to change once short-term needs are met.

Reality-test your standards regularly. Goals change as we move through life. Allow obsolete objectives to atrophy; realize that past desires may be no longer relevant.

Think ahead. Chart what you'll get at each career step. Think through what each alteration in your role, function, level or setting will add to your skills, marketable experience, maturity and personal satisfaction. Articulate a rationale for every career step and a strategic plan that ties them all together.

