THE CAREER SHIFTING PROCESS

If you want a position just like the one you left, your job title can help you. If, on the other hand, you want to transfer your skills and experience to another type of job or industry, your most recent job title can act as a label which might hinder your job search efforts.

Employers tend to focus on your latest job title and experience in their initial screening process. They may not understand, if you are coming from another field or industry, that your background does include skills and experience that matches their job requirements. In addition, and most importantly, you'll be competing with individuals who've already been working in that field.

A major career shift may require you to develop a new language in order to overcome employers' inability to identify your transferability to their field or occupational area. You will have to do sufficient research to know what the necessary skills and traits are to do the job, so that you'll know clearly which skills and personal traits of your own are most transferable. You also need to do plenty of research on your target field(s) so that you know the language, terminology and jargon well enough that you can successfully translate your experience into terms those employers will understand. In addition, you need to discover what the needs and problems are in that field or line of work in order to know how to position and sell yourself to potential employers. And the best way to accomplish all this is through creating relationships with people who can give you information and advice, help you strategize and refer you to others.

Some skill sets will be easier to sell across industries, although generally, the greater the career shift you have in mind, potentially the more challenging it is to execute:

- **Same Function, Different Industry**—easiest to execute
- **Different Function, Same Industry/Same Company**—many times a smart interim strategy for executing a career shift
- **Different Function, Different Industry**—the most challenging, you will need to: 1) have solid transferable skills, 2) know how feasible this shift is for you, and 3) have a strong plan

FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS

When considering a career shift, balance your imagination and enthusiasm with the practicalities of your life and the realities of the marketplace. Most likely “paying some dues” and careful targeting will be required.

When considering the endeavor of changing career field or functions, it’s important to realistically assess your goal and to research it thoroughly. The amount of energy and effort you invest will enable you to know if your goal is feasible and if so, will increase your likelihood of success.

If you want to transfer your skills and experience to a new type of work, how do you start? How do you overcome the barriers associated with you present job title?

The first step you need to take is to do a “feasibility analysis” of your career goal.

Questions to Ask Yourself and What to Research

Talk to others who are actually doing the work you are targeting. Even better if you can find those who made a shift with the same or similar background as yours. Read, research, do informational interviews, and be sure you talk to more than two or three people.

Talking to those you don’t know in your target field or function may be more productive than talking with those who know you well, since those who know you may sometimes unwittingly hold you back by “pigeonholing” you or not see you in another light.
Why Are You Seeking This Shift?
• Are you clear as to why you want to make this change?
• How much do you know about this career field?
• How have you demonstrated your commitment to making this career shift?
• How much research have you already done, if any? What sources of information have you used to learn about your target job(s)
• What are the information channels for learning about this field/function? What are the periodicals, trade publications, professional journals, conferences, trade shows I can use for research?
• How much detail do you know about the job descriptions of the positions you’re targeting?

Is This Career Shift Realistic and Attainable?
• Which jobs are the most realistic fit for you and why?
• What are the typical career paths to enter this work?
• What kind of person does well in this work?
• What leadership experiences have you had that you think would qualify you for your target job?
• What skills and accomplishments do you have that will transfer to the new work?
• What examples of transferable experience and skills could you give, if asked in an interview?
• What are the work style/working conditions of your target job(s) and how do they fit with your own work preferences and needs?
• Are you willing to compromise? If so, what compromises do you anticipate?
• Will this career shift require a physical move or can you do it where you presently live?
• What investment of time, finances, and energy are you willing to make?
• What is a realistic time frame for executing your shift/achieving your goal?
• Can your goal realistically be achieved in a single step or is this a two or three step process?

Do You Have Support for Making This Shift?
• If you make a career shift, what is the impact on those closest to you?
• Is your spouse/significant other supportive?
• Do you have financial resources and emotional support for making the changes?
• Are you prepared to deal with those who say you can’t do it?

What are the Knowledge and Experience Gaps?
• What’s missing from your background—where are the knowledge and experience gaps?
• What do you need to do to close the gaps? Can you close the gaps?

• Have you identified the barriers to entry for you, given the hiring requirements for this career path and your own individual background? What are they?

• How might this be a barrier to entry for you?

• Are there strategies you can use for overcoming this barrier? If so, what are they?
  ➢ Knowledge of industry trends and issues through journals and informational interviews
  ➢ Involvement in professional organizations
  ➢ Use of language and knowledge of the field to market yourself
  ➢ Experience gained through volunteerism, internships, part-time work

• What are the developmental/transitional activities you need to be doing?

• Are there people who can help you with the barriers and your goals? If so, who are they?

• What is a realistic time frame for executing your shift/achieving your goal?

• Can your goal realistically be achieved in a single step or is this a two or three step process?

Talk to the experts or those who’ve done a lot of hiring—
  • What do employers look for? What do they anticipate will be your challenges for making this shift?
  • What advice and strategies can they give you?

Closing the Gaps -- Assessing Your Current Organization
It’s important to remember that you may not immediately get to do what you want—it may take more time than you think to achieve your desired career shift, and you may not be able to accomplish it in one move.

Although you may really want to leave your current job and organization, take a second strategic look at both from the standpoint of whether you can leverage and strengthen your experience by creating an internal shift first that will then better enable you to make an external shift.

• Do people in your company shift areas, functions, roles? How do they do it?

• Does the organizational culture support internal shifting?

• What is the organization’s capacity to enable you to achieve your goals?

• Whose help will you need and how will you go about getting it?

• Are there possible internal opportunities for beginning this shifting process right where you are?

• If so, what kind of plan and strategy will be required?

• What are the barriers?

• Are there people who can help you with the barriers and your goals? If so, who are they?

“CRAFTING EXPERIMENTS, SHIFTING CONNECTIONS, MAKING SENSE”
Herminia Ibarra, author of the book *Working Identity*, writes about these 3 aspects of successful career shifting:

1. **Crafting Experiments**: Trying out new activities and professional roles on a small scale before making a major commitment to a different path

2. **Shifting Connections**: Developing new contacts who can open doors to new worlds; finding role models and new peer groups to guide and benchmark your progress

3. **Making Sense**: Finding or creating catalysts and triggers for change and using them as occasions to rework your story

**“Crafting Experiments” – Closing the Knowledge and Experience Gap**

Unlike the traditional plan-and-implement career development process for advancement within the same field/function, career shifting usually requires experimentation. The plan-and-implement approach can also lead to paralysis and inertia if taking action is postponed. Ibarra maintains that “Doing comes first, knowing second.” Sometimes successful career shifting involves trial and error through a process of actually testing out your career interests before making a decision.

You may need to try side work, project work, consulting assignments at small companies who need the extra help, “internships,” unpaid apprenticeship projects, volunteer work through professional organizations or for non-profits in order to test out your interest and also gain possible missing experience from your background.

**“Shifting Connections” -- Creating New Relationships**

Shifting connections refers to the need to find people connected to the work you are targeting that may view you more objectively in your new identity than those who already know you might. Creating a new network of developmental relationships will enable you to connect with new people who can guide you into your new identity, support your efforts and provide resources, information and referrals to help you execute your shift.

**“Making Sense” -- Telling Your Story**

In many ways, this is the most important aspect of the career shifting process. You need to create and tell a story that first makes sense to you, and then will be persuasive and credible when told to prospective employers. You must be able to explain in a compelling way why you made the career decisions you did, what you want to do now and why this career shift makes sense.

You must craft a good career transition narrative that is coherent so that you establish yourself as a credible person who can be trusted and who is likely to succeed in this new work. You will need to tell and re-tell your story, practicing and refining it, until it feels comfortable and authentic to you.

You will also need to translate your relevant experience into language and terms that target employers will respond to—you need to connect the dots. You can’t assume that the employer will automatically recognize your transferability!

**FINDING WORK**

When contemplating the job search process for a career shift, keep the following considerations in mind:
1. **Plan for a longer job search.** Shifting industries requires research, which requires time. Assess your financial situation and make realistic decisions. You may have to consider an interim position or part-time work to bridge to your new career.

2. **Stay grounded in reality.** Successful career shift is based on setting realistic goals, making an honest assessment of your skills, and then matching those against the current market conditions.

3. **Forget about ads and search firms.** With the exception of entry-level positions, companies run ads to recruit prospects with specific experience. This is also true of search firms, which are paid by their client companies to find highly experienced talent that matches exactly the job description.

4. **Network, network, network.** Networking is the key to any successful job search, especially in the case of a career shift. The most effective way to transfer skills to a new field or new career is by using your contacts. Companies are more willing to take risks on people who are referred to them by individuals who can account for the candidates’ abilities and potential.

5. **YOU must precede your resume.** The relationships you create and build through your networking efforts will enable you to become a “known commodity,” which is essential in a career shift since you may not look like a match in your resume for the work that you are targeting.

6. **Learn the language.** Every field has its own culture and language. Assess your skill set and align it with industry needs. Then translate your skills into language that resonates with those in that industry. Know and speak to your target audience.

7. **Learn the business.** Professionals today are expected to have an understanding of the current issues and challenges facing their industries. Read every article you can find on the industry, so that you can leverage your skills in offering solutions to industry challenges and demonstrate the value you would add to an organization.

Making an industry or career shift is not impossible, but it will increase your job search time and the amount of research and effort to be successful. Before you make any firm decisions, consider the positives and negatives carefully and seek advice from knowledgeable others so that you can be sure you are willing to make the commitment necessary for success.