

# Print Edition

JOB MOVES

## **A whole new me: Career reinvention**

**In a swooning economy, more people may rethink the career path they've been on to move in a completely different direction**

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Four years ago, in the midst of a conversation with the office accountant, Peter Zednik had an epiphany.

"I thought, 'I want to do what you do. I want to be an accountant.' "

It was quite a leap: Mr. Zednik had spent the previous 30 years building a career in the theatre, with stints as an actor, music director and award-winning playwright. At the time of his conversation with the accountant, Mr. Zednik was 47 and general manager of a Vancouver theatre company.

Could he really make the jump from the world of stages to the world of balance sheets?

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He could, and he did. Shortly after his "aha" moment, Mr. Zednik quit his job and enrolled in a two-year financial management program at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. He now works as an accountant at Alan F. Saucier Inc., a firm in Vancouver.

Mr. Zednik is among many people who, for various reasons, completely reinvent their careers.

With the economy swooning and fears of job loss swelling, more people may rethink the career path they've been on and the possibilities of moving in a whole new direction and into an entirely unrelated field, career pros say.

What possesses people to put themselves through the challenge of fleeing careers where they have established themselves for new ones that appear wholly unrelated to their previous working lives?

The reasons can range from a job layoff to chronic job dissatisfaction to a milestone birthday, such as the big five-O, says Joseph Tomlinson, president of J.A.T. Associates, an Ottawa recruiting firm.

"Or sometimes you just get to a point where you've gone as far as you can go in your career but you've still got a lot of energy and ambition left," he says. "The logical next step is to make a drastic change and, hopefully, land somewhere where they can continue to feel challenged at work."

Uncertain economic times like these can be a big catalyst for a career reinvention, says Mark Franklin, president of CareerCycles Associates, a Toronto firm that provides career counselling and coaching.

"Getting laid off can be a blessing in disguise for many people," Mr. Franklin says. "While the initial knee-jerk reaction may be to minimize their down time by finding a job they're already familiar with, I'm finding people who have been laid off do often see their circumstances as a blessing in disguise to step back, reassess themselves, and pursue a career that really engages them, even if that means going out on a limb and doing something so different."

But making that radical career change is far from easy, say workplace and career experts as well as career reinventors themselves.

For starters, people will often need to pick up new skills and know-how. For many, this means leaving the status and security of their jobs while forking out significant money to go to school.

That was the case for Sue Dullege, who, at 47, and after 15 years of working as a nurse, quit her job to study medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton. Tuition fees alone cost Ms. Dullege and her husband more than \$50,000. She also had to temporarily leave the Toronto house she shared with her husband to rent an apartment in Hamilton during her three years of study.

"When you add the cost of books, ink, paper and everything else you needed to stay within the program, you're looking at a sizable investment," says Ms. Dullege, now a family medicine resident at Kingston General Hospital in Kingston, Ont. "My husband continued to work while I went to school but we had to tighten our belts and make some financial sacrifices."

Many who choose to reinvent their careers tend to do so later in their lives and often encounter ageism when they start to look for work in their new field, experts say.

Mr. Zednik, who was 49 when he graduated from the British Columbia Institute of Technology and started to hunt for a job in accounting, recalls one HR manager who told him she didn't think he would be able to take direction from younger people.

"She also said that if I worked there, it would be a disincentive to younger people because they'd see me and think 'I could work hard my whole life and still end up at the bottom rung of the ladder,' " he recalls. "I thought that was just so offensive."

Another challenge, he says, was convincing prospective employers he was making a drastic career change because he wanted to explore new territory, not because he was a failure in his previous role.

"When I started going for interviews, the initial assumption of the people interviewing me was that I was a total flake and I must be doing this because I couldn't make it in the theatre business," he says.

"I also had to fight stereotypes about people in theatre - one HR person I spoke with told me that accounting is a very detail-oriented job and, given my background in the theatre, it would be totally inappropriate for me."

But as Mr. Zednik and others have shown, career reinventions can be done - with the right approach, a lot of determination, and a bit of luck.

Mr. Franklin says successful career reinventions begin with an honest self-assessment, analyzing why you're looking to make a radical switch and where you want to go next.

People who are considering a career change often focus too much on what job skills and experience they have that can easily be applied to another career, he says.

Instead, he recommends thinking more about what kind of work would really satisfy them. "People often mistake ability for affinity, but the fact is what you're good at isn't always necessarily what you want to do," Mr. Franklin says.

Sometimes people who do a career self-assessment are surprised to discover they love their jobs after all, he says.

"When you give people the absolute freedom to look at other possibilities, many of them realize what they're doing is pretty good but they just need to fine-tune it by maybe taking on more challenging projects or working less hours," he says.

"Or maybe they need to find a similar job, but in a better company," Mr. Franklin says.

Those who do opt to go the reinvention route will have to do plenty of research, says Charysse Robinson, president of pdaPR, a Toronto public relations firm. And it helps to be a go-getter who doesn't shy away from cold-calling prospective

employers. Before she quit her job as a counsellor in a call centre that helps troubled youth, she went on a book-buying spree for tomes on the PR business.

She also contacted PR agencies in hopes of getting a chance to shadow a pro on the job. One responded with an invitation to meet at a media event it was organizing.

"When I got there, I learned that a couple of people who had been hired to help at the event didn't show up, so I immediately jumped in and got to work. That immediately impressed the agency's owner and, soon after, I started doing freelance work for her," recalls Ms. Robinson, who launched her own PR firm last February.

Mr. Zednik says it's smart to get some idea of what you might be getting into.

"Talk to somebody working in the career you want to go into. Find out not just about the good things you dream about but the day-to-day reality of the job."

As for the financial challenges, the experts' advice is simple: Create a plan and save as much as you can to make it a reality. And keep in mind you can withdraw money from your RRSP to pay for part of your education costs.

The latter was how Laura Pink, a former dental hygienist, financed her nine-month studies at Seneca College in Toronto, where she had signed up for the corporate communications certificate program.

Ms. Pink, who started a job last June as communications co-ordinator at Crescent School, a private boys' school in Toronto, also worked part-time as a dental hygienist to make ends meet. It was a practical and logical decision, she says, that allowed her to earn some extra money doing what she already knew how to do while pursuing a new career.

Many schools offer scholarships for mature students, something Mr. Zednik was able to take advantage of. His background in theatre also allowed him to access a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts.

When it comes time to start looking for work, one big challenge is how to overcome a hiring manager's skepticism and false assumptions.

Mr. Tomlinson says the best approach is head-on. "Anticipate that the person across the desk from you is wondering why, after all these years, you've left your career and tackle the issue straight away," he advises. "Emphasize that this change was not made on a whim and that you can offer years of experience plus new knowledge and new energy."

But don't expect to start on the same rung of the career ladder you left behind.

"Egos can get in the way, especially if you reached a senior position in your previous career and are used to doing things your way," Mr. Tomlinson says. "But if you're going to make a successful career change, you better park your ego at the door or you're going to sink like a stone."

Ms. Pink says it's a good idea to relate your previous work experience to the job you're applying for - no matter how different the two may seem.

She drew parallels between her job as a dental hygienist serving a community of patients and the job of a communications employee serving the school's community.

Mr. Zednik, now 51, used the same approach. As a theatre manager, he had to juggle multiple priorities, deal with a pile of paperwork, and meet tight deadlines - much like an accountant.

In September, 2006, after several months of unemployment, Mr. Zednik finally found an employer willing to give him a chance at a new career in accounting. He says he couldn't be happier.

"When I was making the decision to quit the theatre, one question that kept coming up was, 'What if I do this and then completely screw it up?' " he recalls. "Fear of the unknown is the worst fear of all, but I had a dream I felt very strongly about and I thought if I don't pursue this now, I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

### *Moves to make*

Thinking about a career reinvention? Consider these words of wisdom from experts and workers who have made dramatic changes:

#### Learn thyself

Do an honest self-assessment. Think about why you want to make a change and what you're really looking for. Look back at your life to figure out what things you've enjoyed doing in the past.

#### Try it on for size

Research the job and the industry you're interested in pursuing. Read books, browse the Internet and periodicals, and talk to people already working in your dream job. Even better, get some first-hand experience by job shadowing or signing up for volunteer work in your target field.

#### Get set for school

Many radical career changes require further education. Be ready for the financial hit of going back to school while losing your full-time income. If you can, save well ahead of time. Look into the Lifelong Learning Plan that allows those with RRSPs to pull out a portion of their savings to pay for education. Ask about scholarships or bursaries for mature students.

#### Let go of your ego

Recognize you won't begin on the same career ladder rung you left behind. Be prepared to start at the bottom. Do as much as you can to build experience and credibility in your new field, even if this means doing work for free or performing tasks you might consider beneath you.

#### Counter skepticism

Expect some - or maybe even all - prospective employers to have doubts about hiring someone from a completely different career background. Be prepared to explain why you have made such a drastic move. Emphasize your working experience and renewed energy. Think about parallel and transferable skills from your previous occupation.

### *Marjo Johne*

#### CLOSE-UP: REINVENTION IN ACTION

#### LAURA PINK

FROM: Dental hygienist

TO: Communications co-ordinator

The 40-year-old now works at a private school for boys in Toronto.

#### Turning point

"At the age of 38, I realized I could not sustain a career as a dental hygienist - it was too physically demanding. So I went on workopolis.com and came across a listing for a college program in corporate communications and public relations."

How she did it

Ms. Pink enrolled in the communications certificate program at Seneca College in Toronto.

She withdrew money from her RRSP to cover tuition and other costs of the nine-month program and continued to work part-time as a dental hygienist to make ends meet. To kickstart her portfolio, she did some pro bono public relations work for a dental patient.

Word to the wise

"Be prepared to not find work right away in your new field. And have an attitude of saying 'yes' to everything for the experience - I did market research for a theatre design company even though I could make more working part-time as a dental hygienist."

SUE DULLEGE

FROM: Nurse

TO: Doctor

The 50-year-old is now a family medicine resident at Kingston General Hospital in Kingston, Ont.

Turning point

After working as a nurse for a decade, Ms. Dullege decided to go back to school to earn a bachelor of science degree in nursing, studying and continuing to work part-time for another five years.

The degree led to a part-time teaching job at York University, which made Ms. Dullege worry she was moving away from her first love: caring for patients.

"I told my husband I was starting to have concerns and he said: 'For heaven's sake, why don't you become a doctor?' "

How she did it

Ms. Dullege drew on the savings she and her husband had accumulated over the years to study medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton. She had to rent an apartment in Hamilton during her studies while her husband stayed in their house in Toronto.

"We had to tighten our belts and make some financial sacrifices," she says.

Word to the wise

"If you want to succeed in a new career, you need to commit 100 per cent and burn your bridges to the old career. Otherwise, you'll always have that as a crutch.

CHARYSSE ROBINSON

FROM: Youth counsellor

TO: Public relations

The 24-year-old now owns public relations firm pdaPR in Toronto.

Turning point

In the spring of 2006, Ms. Robinson was helping to organize an event for her employer. "Then at one point, I was having dinner with friends I kept getting phone calls related to the event and making notes on my Palm Pilot. One of my friends said, as a joke: 'Who do you think you are, a publicist?' That night, when I went home, I realized that everything I had really enjoyed about my job for the past seven years had something to do with PR."

How she did it

Ms. Robinson went to the local bookstore and read up as much as she could about the business of public relations. She then e-mailed and cold-called several public relations firms to see if they would let her shadow a PR person on the job. One PR firm invited her to an event, where she pitched in when she learned it was short-staffed.

Word to the wise

"Forget your ego and do what you need to do to prove yourself and gain people's trust."

*Marjo Johne*