

How to Get You Career Unstuck!

By Clay Parsons

Do you hate your job? Is your career going nowhere? Are you unsure of your options and afraid of the consequences of making a wrong choice? Many of us at one time or another have experienced these symptoms. If you are currently in this fix and are feeling STUCK, try the following steps to move out of your indecision and find what you are looking for.

Getting your career unstuck is all about getting traction, and once you have traction, doing something meaningful with it. By traction I mean the ability to move from a dead stop - where you have been stuck and getting nowhere, to a point where you have momentum and know where you are headed. The emotional difference between the two is dramatic. When your career is stuck you feel boxed-in and hopeless; when you are clearly moving in the right direction, even if you have not yet arrived, the future is full of promise. Of course the key to getting traction is to make a credible effort to begin the process. The first step is to remove what I call the ‘stuck’ factor.

Get off the train!

To get “unstuck” you will need to make a big change in your career. Nothing less will do. The most obvious is to stop the career train you are on and get off, by leaving your current position, and by finding a part-time temporary job to keep you healthy and financially stable while you work on your career and job search. If you are completely immersed in your job, fighting off the stress of your commute, dealing with a dysfunctional work environment and mounting frustration, you will not have the energy and time necessary to make any major career changes. You will not have the mental clarity to make fully conscious decisions. You will also not have the time to do the research and make the contacts necessary to fully scope out your options. Career change takes time, commitment and lots of effort. Action is the key, not just thinking action but “doing” action. The quick fix, which is so much a part of our consumer culture doesn’t exist when it comes to making major changes in your life. An interesting and successful life and career is not a product that you can purchase. You have to work at it. Accept the fact that you are in the wrong job and commit all of your energy and intellect to finding your ideal career path.

A little time off

Although this step is absolutely necessary many people find it hard to accept. When you leave your old job take the time to relieve the symptoms of physical and psychological burnout. Remember that your psyche has to make a big adjustment. Even if you hated your work, it is the devil you know. Now you are asking it to accept the unknown, a very uncomfortable prospect for most people even if it offers the possibility of great happiness. Even the most dysfunctional job will have had moments of enjoyment and even success, especially if you are leaving close friends behind. Take the time to adjust, and let go of what you are leaving. Spend a week at the beach picking up driftwood with your partner. Go hiking in the mountains. When you return, if your mind is still cluttered with “work-talk”, write a serious letter to your old boss and colleagues about how much you hated the place and how much you love your new life without them. Then burn it, or even mail it! Celebrate the ending of that phase of your life with a toast, and then move on. Only when your mind is clear and uncluttered, move on to the next phase.

Make a commitment

After getting off the express train and taking some time to unwind and let go, begin your career search process. Starting this journey can be the most difficult step in the entire process. It requires you to fully commit to take the appropriate action and time required to re-align your life and career. It cannot be done by looking at it as an intellectual exercise, a game to be explored at your computer, and accepted or rejected depending on how you feel about it. It is similar to taking a leap of faith. You are making a major life move and betting the house on your success. If you work hard at it and believe in yourself you will succeed. Remember the Henry Ford quote, “ Whether you believe you can, or believe you can’t, you are absolutely right.”

When I was serving as a counselor and instructor at FortyPlus, a national non-profit for unemployed executives, we calculated that it took six to eight months for a senior manager or professional to find a position. That was during the dot.com boom. During a recessionary period it usually takes longer. If you add to the equation the complications of a career change process it can easily take a year or longer. Make a commitment to yourself that you will take the necessary time to do it right. If you find you cannot, either financially or in terms of time available to commit to the process, put your plans on hold and return to them when you can.

I am frequently asked if many of my clients succeed in actually changing their careers. My answer is always, “those that are committed succeed; those that are not committed do not.” It is almost always true.

Get yourself organized

Getting yourself organized says that you are serious. It starts the whole process moving. And it begins at home. Find a place in your house or apartment where you can work uninterrupted. When you go there, work, don't play. Make sure you have an adequate Internet connection at DSL speed and a good quality ink jet printer. Make sure you have all the major programs on your computer. People will email you with attachments; make sure that you can open them. Keep a file cabinet for paper files. If you tend to be disorganized get a pocket organizer, either paper or electronic. If you have the means, also purchase a FAX machine. You should have the means to receive information about a job prospect from anyone. Also keep a record of all of your contacts, their names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, the dates of your phone conversations, meetings etc. and what you discussed and important issues etc. This will help you remember important names, topics and other job search relevant information. Keep all this information in a place where you can quickly and easily access it.

Emphasize action

Beginning a new career requires much more than analysis and problem solving, which many of us are very good at. It requires that we step away from our computers, meet new people, and explore places and situations that are largely unknown to us. All of this involves personal risk taking especially for those of us who are introverts. A new career will not come to you because of your past accomplishments and ability. You have to go out and find it, and in some cases pay the necessary dues to get into the field. For example, in education you will need a teaching certificate; in management, an MBA. There will always be requirements. It is a myth however to believe that you will have to start all over again at the bottom and work your way up. Most people who change their careers offer a tremendous amount of experience and special skills that they can transfer to their new career. This is of real value to a new employer.

Focus, focus, focus

Obviously, in order to hit the target you need to focus your attention. What is the direction you wish to go in, and then after you have narrowed your focus, what are your targets, including type of organization, role or position, etc? Who are the people you need to talk to, to get reliable information, and then to find a position? Who has influence, and can help you find a job, who does not? What is the culture of the organization? All of these questions must be answered if you are to make a fully informed decision regarding your career change.

In order to get the information you need to make that decision, look at it as if you are working for a major newspaper. I am your editor and I have given you an assignment to do in-depth research into this new field. I want you to write an article about it, including what the field is all about, who the individual players are, who are the organizations who are most successful etc. You will need to cover a lot of bases in order to become fully briefed before you sit down to write the article. Your assignment will require a lot of work, phone calls, interviews, meetings, etc. It cannot be patched together overnight, but neither can a career decision which will influence how you live the rest of your life. Give it the time it deserves.

Keep on track

In good times it sometimes takes six to eight months to find a good position. Along the way there are all kinds of distractions that can derail your campaign. Some are unpredictable like family problems, others are entirely predictable like boredom, frustration and even anger. Regardless of the issue, find a way to keep your career search on track. Join a job and career search support group facilitated by a career professional. Share your good and bad experiences with colleagues. Help others with their job search; it will make you feel better about yourself. Regularly consult with a professional career counselor to assess your strategy and game plan. Keep a regular job or career search schedule - like you would at work - and adhere to it. Lastly, conduct a review of your focus, strategy and action plan every month or so to see if it is working. Don't be afraid to make adjustments or changes. Remember, there are no absolute rules in this game. Keep an open mind. And keep moving!

Treat yourself well

Changing a career is not for the faint hearted! The process and inevitable bumps along the way will severely try your patience. There will be days when you will question your decision and your sanity. But, trust me, I have seen it through with my clients many times and I know that it will work, and it will be worth it. Just remember to be kind to yourself along the way. Take quality time off to be with your family and friends. Go on a long planned vacation. Clear your mind once in a while and then redouble your efforts. Keep in mind that a good interview depends just as much on how you are feeling as your knowledge and abilities.

The results!

After a career change and six month job search a client called me with this message. " I wanted you to know, I just accepted the new position we talked about yesterday, I'm so happy I feel like I'm walking on water! "

Go for it.