

Need a career change? Go for it, but be informed

BY KIT ALMY

In today's rapidly changing world, the days of sticking with one job, or even one career, for an entire lifetime are long gone. For a variety of reasons, many people find themselves midway through their adult lives and suddenly contemplating a brand-new career.

"More and more, we're seeing the age increasing of students who come in to avail themselves of our services," said Ross Hamilton, director of student employment and student organization services at Kalamazoo Valley Community College, whose office helps people entering the job market, whether for the first time as a young adult, or later, after having worked for several years.

"It's very, very common for people in their mid-40s to come in and say, 'I'm very embarrassed; I've never had to put together a resume before. I have no idea where to even start.'" Such a person might have graduated from college with a nursing degree, had three job offers right out of school, taken one and stayed with it, Hamilton explained, so they've never really experienced being in the job market.

That shouldn't stop them from pursuing their interests, however. "People shouldn't feel embarrassed or that they're alone, because they're not," he said. There are many reasons adults make the shift. Perhaps they want to work a less demanding schedule, or just want to be doing something different after 20 years in one field.

According to Cheryl Hayden, a career counselor in the counseling department at Glen Oaks Community College, Centreville, personal satisfaction is the best reason to choose a particular career. She herself is in her fourth career – which she loves – and she'd recommend to anyone considering a career change to go for it. "I love my job and I wish that for everyone," she said. "Anyone who doesn't feel that should be looking inside."

However, Hayden cautions that sticking with or switching careers just for the money is not the right way to go. "If you're doing something you don't enjoy, no matter how much they're paying you, it's not worth it," she said.

The key to success when considering a career switch, according to career counselors, is becoming

informed. "I'm a big believer in details," said Hayden. "The more people know, the more satisfied they'll be with their choice. If they don't experience the atmosphere of the job they might be disappointed."

"The fact that you're looking into it doesn't mean you're going to do it," she continued. "Get as much information about the career as you can. Talk to people working in the field and ask them the questions you'd like to ask in a job interview, but couldn't."

Questions like:

"If I were to do what you're doing, what would my prior training and experience be?"

"Could I find a job in this area?"

"What would my starting salary be?"

Such questions provide helpful insights into a field.

Hamilton also recommends getting direct experience in the field by "job shadowing" someone who's already doing the work. "If they come in with an idea of what they want to do, we partner them with people in the profession they want to go into," he said, so that they can get an idea of what the job really entails "before they invest a lot of resources, like tuition dollars, time, or building an extensive resume."

Changing careers is not without its risks and costs.



Ross Hamilton, of Kalamazoo Valley Community College, works with student Guadalupe Moore on a computer. When researching jobs, the Internet can be a convenient way to find a wealth of information on companies.

Hamilton says it helps a lot when someone has the financial resources to make the transition to a new field, where they may have to take a pay reduction of \$10,000 to \$15,000 dollars because they have no experience.

"The toughest is when they want to make a change and don't have any financial cushion," he said. In such a case, a person might have to work two jobs (one of which is the one they want to leave) and possibly go to school, which can be very challenging.

Once you know what you want to do and have the training, follow good basic job search advice. Said Hamilton, "It's always easier to find employment while you're currently employed."

Job searchers should also make sure to build good resumes and portfolios and practice their interviewing skills. Here, once again, being informed is the key. Hamilton also recommends attending career fairs and employment expos to meet with potential employers and get information about different companies.

The Internet, too, makes it even more convenient to find a wealth of information on companies. "There's no reason nowadays to go unprepared for an interview," Hamilton said. "Employers recognize when someone's done their homework," he explained, and that's especially important for career changers who don't have the experience in the field and need an extra edge.

Despite reports of a lagging economy, Hamilton doesn't think this is a bad time to look for a new job. "I believe in many areas, it's still an employee's market."

Hayden said that there are number of growing fields right now, including all sorts of medical professions, computing, engineering, and elementary education.

The bottom line is that changing careers can be liberating and does not have to be risky. The experts stress that doing your homework and being persistent will help you make a smooth transition.

Hayden said, "If you talk to someone who's sour on their career, don't just go on their advice. Don't get just one person's opinion. People pick careers for the wrong reasons."

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