Making a Career Transition

Career transitions for medical professionals can be tricky. You’ve invested tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars in your career already, not to mention years of study and apprenticeship. Toying with the resulting product can seem like madness, particularly if there are still student loans to be paid.

And yet, if you’re not happy, what’s the point in pretending you are? Unhappy workers don’t tend to invest further in their work, which means they risk getting stuck at just the place that makes them the most unhappy. A vicious circle can ensue, with a downward spiral that becomes more difficult to break the longer it goes on.

Certainly, the solution might be a career transition with a capital T, but it’s also possible that a less drastic resolution could be found—a type of “micro” career transition. In other words, rather than fleeing one’s medical career to operate a scuba–diving shop in Bali, the restless medical professional might refresh his or her career by making micro-transitions. Hence, a practitioner who feels burned out by constant patient contact could change venues (resulting in a different patient mix) or specialties (providing “new” problems to treat), or even occupations within the field of medicine (moving to administration, or back to an earlier emphasis on research, for example).

Yet another transition model would be one of career “evolution” or “layering” where the professional adds a second credential or skill set to augment his or her primary expertise. As an example, medical professionals with law degrees are not uncommon these days. With such dual licensure, the professional can add new duties to his or her medical duties, can begin an extended transition into the new field, or can lay the groundwork for a retirement career.

Speaking of retirement careers—moving out of one’s daily work and into retirement is also a type of career transition. Depending on financial resources, many professionals retire from demanding career paths earlier than the culturally prescribed age 60 or 65. These are nearly always situations calling for a new career identity or vocation, especially since there are only so many rounds of golf one can expect to enjoy with our extended life spans.

One other type of transition, which can occur at any point in one’s working life, might be the change from being an employee to being self-employed. The field of medicine, of course, has enjoyed a long tradition of self-employment for doctors who start their own practices. Today, there are even more models of self-employment to emulate, ranging from practice partners to medical device inventors to entrepreneurial physicians who open their own clinics or hit the speaking circuit.

Whether the transition you embark on is all-encompassing or simply a move from one role to another inside of your current workplace, things will go more smoothly if you have a plan and a process to follow. With that in mind, here are some steps to help you create a good career transition for yourself.

1. Determine the source of your restlessness. Perhaps you’ve learned all that you can in your current work and the repetition is sapping your energy. Or maybe the physical constraints of working in a particular setting are wearing you down. It could be that you feel uninspired by your specialty. This self-exploration could take some time to accomplish, but it’s important to feel clear about the elements in your work that should eliminated; otherwise you risk repeating the same situation in the next iteration. To help accomplish this evaluation, consider using a journal to capture your thoughts, or meeting with a counselor who can ask questions that reveal patterns you might not be seeing.

2. Capture and explore ideas for the next thing. To capture ideas, keep a pocket recorder or journal with you for several weeks and record anything that crosses your mind in that time. When you sit down to sort through the ideas, expect to find thoughts that range from the mundane to the outrageous. Even so, at this stage, all ideas are “keepers.” Your task is to sift your list until two or three ideas emerge as the most exciting or interesting. Even if the shortened list includes something you consider unrealistic, the item should stay on the list until you can prove that it isn’t possible. Until then, follow this mantra: “I don’t know what I don’t know.” Tools and processes to help with this step might include career assessments, informational interviewing, Internet research, career counseling, and even exploratory classes or experiential learning activities.
3. **Research the ideas on your short list.** With only two or three items to research, this step becomes more doable than it would be if you had a dozen random career concepts colliding in your head. Now you can create a list of questions and find the answers, providing a logical process to follow. Initial questions will be big-picture: What is this? Who does it? Ensuing questions will bring the issue down to practical terms: Is there a market? What are the income expectations? How much training is needed? The final questions will be personal: Can I imagine myself in this role? Do I like where this path would bring me? Tools and processes for this step might again include informational interviewing, Internet searches and other forms of research. This step should produce a “winner” in terms of the best option of the three you’re exploring. But if nothing emerges, simply go back to the original list and choose three more to explore. As a warning: If you find yourself exploring more than say, six or eight career choices at this depth, consider enlisting the help of a career counselor. You don’t want to get stuck in “analysis paralysis;” nor do you want to spend time over-researching areas that you might feel only a faint attraction for.

4. **Build your list of transition steps.** Suppose your process reveals that you would enjoy being a medical school instructor. Now what? Do you know what the process is to get hired in this capacity? Or the credentials required? Do people get hired straight from practice, or do they fare better with some prior teaching experience? If the latter, how would one get that experience? You can see from the questions that a number of steps might present themselves, ranging from the fairly mechanical (find a list of all medical schools) to the philosophical (explore what style of teaching I most want to use). You may need more credentialing to pursue your new path, or find that giving presentations at medical conferences will increase your marketability. Whatever steps you can imagine taking, they will need to find their way onto a list so you can begin to create your plan.

5. **Build your transition timeline.** Now that you know more about the steps needed, and their general order, you can start to populate a timeline. For example, if you determine that you’ll need a new course of study, and it is only offered in January, your timeline will now hold an entry for that month. Working backwards, you can see that you might need to rearrange your work schedule to accommodate the training, and that you will need to register for the training by November at the latest—both items also go on the timeline. If you prefer, you can build this timeline as your very first transition step by assigning the first several weeks or months on the timeline to the process of exploring and choosing a new direction. It’s not unusual for transition timelines to encompass a period of several years, particularly if training is needed. As well, those who plan to leave a private practice need to assume at least a year for the process of transitioning out of the practice, particularly if there are assets to sell.

6. **Begin your transition.** This may seem unnecessary to say, but if you don’t begin, you won’t make a transition at all. Too many of us “live in our heads” when it comes to complex, multi-step processes, particularly when they emanate from a general sense of unease or restlessness. In plain terms, it’s sometimes easier to live with your current discomfort than it is to embark on a plan to relieve it. But know this: Time will pass, regardless of how you spend it. Will you be happier in five years if you make the transition, or if you stay on your current course? While no one can know that answer with certainty, most of us can intuit a pretty clear response to the question. So ask yourself that question, then decide what to do with the answer. It’s in your hands.

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