



## Sound advice for those switching jobs

By Lee Miller/The Star-Ledger

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In today's tight job market, many people are thinking about changing careers — some because there is no longer a demand for what they were doing and others who feel that, as long as they are looking for new employment, they might as well find a career they really want.

Unfortunately, changing careers is easier when the job market is strong because you are not competing with large numbers of individuals who have been employed in that position before. Regardless of how many available candidates there are for any particular job, someone will be selected, and sometimes the person selected will be a career changer. Here are some tips that will help you be that person:

Almost all the experts I spoke with start by advising career changers to look at what they like to do and what they do well. The advice offered by Caroline Dowd-Higgins, director of Career and Professional Development at Indiana University School of Law, is illustrative. She counsels career changers to "take the time to get quiet with yourself and discover what you value, what interests you, how your personality plays a role in your career and inventory your skills."

The mistake many job changers make, however, is to focus too much on what they want and not enough on what employers need. What will attract the interest of a potential employer is that some aspect of your past experience makes you uniquely valuable to them. The more important the skills are to them, the more likely they are to overlook the fact there are other aspects of the job you haven't previously done. So look for an employer that really needs what you have to offer.

Often, the best way to change careers is in steps, leveraging what you have done in the past while demonstrating your ability to do other things. South Orange resident Michelle Tillis Lederman started her career as a certified public accountant at Arthur Anderson and worked as an accountant until she decided to change careers and become a communications trainer. She realized it would be difficult to go directly into training communications, so she first proved herself as a trainer of accounting. That way she could show the people she was working with that she was an effective trainer. Having done that, she was able to start training communications to financial services firms. "The key," according to Lederman, "is to use what you know and the experience you have to make it less of a leap and more of a very big step."

Going back to school may be a prerequisite for changing careers. Even when you have that new degree, however, the skills you bring from your prior work experience are what will enable you to stand out from other recent graduates. For example, Susan Sparks left the practice of law after 10 years of working as a lawyer by day and moonlighting as a comedian at night. After taking some time to figure out what she wanted to do, she entered the seminary. Drawing on her experience as a comedian, she wrote a thesis, titled "Laughing Your Way to Grace," dealing with humor and religion. Currently, she is the senior pastor of the Madison Avenue Baptist Church. She still moonlights as a comedian.

It is also important to be current as to what is going on in the field you want to move into. Hoboken resident Scott Rostan, president of Training the Street, a firm that provides training for financial professionals, advises you thoroughly understand the language used in the industry and "brush up on your skill set especially those involving the technical aspects of the job you are seeking."

The most likely way career changers will find new employment is through the people they know. Jacqueline Chaffin, director of the Career Center at Seton Hall University, suggests you "talk extensively with people who work in your career field of interest and can give you the real perspective and an assessment of how your skills set fits or doesn't fit. And, if possible, find advocates that can represent your skill set."

People are more likely to take a chance on someone who comes recommended by a person they know. So get out

from behind your computer and use all your contacts. Reach out to alumni working in your area of interest. Get involved with professional organizations in the field. Let your family and friends know what you are looking to do. With preparation, persistence and the right job search strategy you can network your way into that new career.

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