

CAREER WATCH

Traversing Career Changes Gracefully

BY PAGE MORAHAN, PHD

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Most academic medical professionals make at least one career transition to an administrative position within an institution, to an academic position at a new institution, or to a completely new career at another organization inside or outside academic medicine.

Some faculty complete a carefully thought out career decision process and make a gradual career change because of lack of career fulfillment or general unhappiness. Others make changes abruptly—either by choice or due to factors outside their control. The following principles will help you make career changes on your terms and time frame.

1. Recognize you're ready for career change. Most jobs involve an initial steep learning curve, an up-and-down period as learning continues, and an eventual plateau. This is normal. After you've stood on that plateau for some time, it's OK to say, "I've been there and done that, and I'm ready to move on." You do not need to stay in a position because others would like you to stay there!

Avoid hanging in there indefinitely, as burn-out and cynicism will set in. Ask yourself: Is there anything my successor would do that I've put off, and does this position continue to provide a unique learning opportunity? If your answer is yes, this is the time to acquire that knowl-

edge and experience - perhaps a scientific or clinical technique, or a management skill like dealing with problem employees.

After careful analysis, you might find that your present position affords more opportunities than you suspect, and factors such as a settled family life, good benefits or a nearing retirement may tilt your decision towards staying put. Furthermore, opportunities outside the duties of your actual job may provide intellectual stimulation and good experience. My thesis is that we all have an innate need to **keep learning, or**



Page Morahan, PhD:
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we wouldn't be in our profession. You may, for instance, decide to increase your participation in disciplinary societies, school or hospital committees, or local nonprofit boards.

2. Identify your professional and personal passions. Successful career transitions require you to identify your pas-

sions. Give serious thought to where you want to direct your life energy. Some of my favorite reflective exercises are:

- ❖ Notice what professional reading you voluntarily pick up. Do you let your disciplinary journals sit, yet find time to read topics like public policy?
- ❖ Think of the end of a day - you may be physically tired but psychically energized. What were you doing that day? Think of the end of another day - you may be physically tired but also psychically drained. What was different about the two days?
- ❖ Describe what you're doing when you completely lose track of time.
 - ❖ Describe your professional and personal achievements. What themes emerge regarding your transferable skills? Which job duties or personal tasks do you most enjoy? These clues help focus your process.
 - ❖ Describe in vivid detail an ideal career day five years from **now**. What are you doing from **morning** to **night**? Where is your **workspace** located, what is the space like, **and** who works there?
- ❖ What professional legacy would **you** like to leave?

3. Investigate career ideas generated by these passions.

- ❖ **Use your scientific investigative** skills to research options via informational interviews. Some key questions: Is the organization stable? Will you keep up with needed skills? Are you aligned with organizational goals?
- ❖ Explore undefined roles. More than

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half of today's job titles did not exist five years ago. How many Vice Presi-

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ONLINE CONNECTIONS

Accessing Data on Health Care Topics and Public Opinion

Scientists can now access facts, figures, and public opinion about a wide variety of health issues on a website sponsored in part by Public Agenda Online and a number of prominent U.S. foundations. Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, non-profit research and education group founded in 1975. The organization bills itself as the inside source for public opinion and policy analysis, and its mission in part is to help leaders in many fields better understand the public's point of view on major policy issues.

Public Agenda Online provides a section on medical research that is light on highly specific scientific data, but contains interesting and potentially useful informa-

tion on a wide variety of topics currently pertinent to medicine, science, and health care delivery. Some sub-sections from the medical research category include:

- ❖ **Notable and Newsworthy:** A digest of current science-related topics from the last several months.
- ❖ **Fact File:** Data and health care trends presented in graphic format. Topics range from the National Institutes of Health budget allocations to factoids about organ transplantation in the United States.
- ❖ **Sources and Resources:** Contact information for key organizations and individuals involved in biomedical research.
- ❖ **Framing the Debate:** Competing theories and arguments surrounding controversial topics such as health care funding and genetic research.
- ❖ **Public Opinion:** Survey findings on a number of hot topics, with results

PUBLIC AGENDA ONLINE
The Inside Source for Public Opinion and Policy Analysis

No Panic But More Doubts in Surveys on Anthrax Attacks

With four people dead of anthrax, and thousands more taking antibiotics, Public Agenda has analyzed the latest survey data to see how Americans feel about anthrax attacks. The survey shows that while many people are still worried, they are not panicking. Instead, they are looking for more information and are skeptical of the media's portrayal of the threat.

Survey Results:

- Somehow worried (46%)
- Not too worried (12%)
- Not at all worried (21%)
- Worried a great deal (19%)

Source: ABC News/Washington Post 10/01

Medicare, medical research, health care, and abortion: Public Agenda presents data, public opinion, and related analyses on these and other topics.

presented in graphic format. Results have been generated from a number of well-known pollsters and news organizations.

This site may be accessed at www.publicagenda.org.

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dent of Compliance positions existed? In these tumultuous times, you can often create a job that "fits you" and meets a vital organizational need.

- ❖ **Do due diligence.** Define the job, title, responsibility, authority, to whom you report, and how/when you'll be evaluated. Ask: If at the end of a year, I make the new boss look outstanding, what would I have achieved? Investigate how "do-able" the job is. Is it stable and funded sufficiently? (New job titles with undefined responsibilities are less stable.) What problems are likely to arise?
- ❖ **Will the job make you more skilled and marketable?** A strategic lateral move may end up filling a gap in your career. For instance, to win a position

as chair or center director, you may need prior experience in a dean's office or within hospital administration to gain broad institutional perspective and visibility. You may need time in a line position managing revenues and expenses. Research shows it's particularly important for women to obtain significant line experience to be competitive for major leadership roles.

4. Understand career transition involves an emotional roller coaster.

Even in good changes, expect to go through grieving, anger, and depression periods. You are likely to first have uninformed optimism, changing quickly to informed pessimism when the "termites in the woodpile" surface. You need to build in support to help you stay on the emotional roller coaster until you reach hopeful realism and eventually informed

realism. At a time when you're likely to disregard proper exercise and sleep, it's actually more important than ever to pay attention to your physical, emotional and spiritual health. This is the time to nurture yourself and stay connected with friends.

Last, never burn bridges! These days, you never know who may be your boss when a merger occurs. By paying attention to these principles, you can make a graceful career transition through which you thrive and position yourself for the next interesting possibility!

Resources for this column come from: Rosen and Paul, *Career Renewal – Tools for Scientists and Technical Professionals*, (Academic Press, 1998); Conner, *Managing At the Speed of Change*, (Villard Books, 1992); and www.catalystwomen.org.