

A *NEW* MISSION

Leading career coaches explain how you can change your career path and explore your potential

By Chris Wright

Gayle Buff, CFA, was good at her job in psychiatric nursing. Capable, confident, and possessed of a deep interest in people, she rose steadily through her profession until she reached the point when she was ready to launch her own business as a psychotherapist.



There was only one problem: “I recognized that wasn’t what I wanted. It didn’t feel right,” says Buff. “I wanted to find out more about business.”

And so, in her early 30s, when most people feel tied into their career choices, Buff changed direction completely. Today, she runs Buff Capital Management, a successful investment advisory firm in Boston.

Not everyone has the guts to set aside a decade or more of accumulated experience and reputation and to seek another path instead. But many of us think about it. In fact, most of us experience at the very least a moment of doubt, a feeling that perhaps we made a misstep early in our career and might be doing the wrong thing. Perhaps it’s just a sense that it is time for a change and that life is long enough to afford us time for more than one career.

Sometimes this feeling might be prompted by a life-changing roadblock, an unexpected redundancy within an employer’s organization, or an illness. Or it might just be a dawning that we are walking the wrong path, a nebulous sense that there is a need for something different.

But should we act upon it? And if so, how?

"THE WORLD NEEDS ME"

Sometimes, as with Roy Cohen, the need for change comes suddenly. Fifteen years ago, the career coach and author of *The Wall Street Professional’s Survival Guide* was a career counsellor for Goldman Sachs, with one office at the bank and another at the World Trade Center. He was at this latter site when the 9/11 attacks took place.

“That was a defining moment and caused me to make a decision about how I envisaged the next chapter of my career,” he says. “I was quite successful, but I didn’t feel like I had found my voice. I was moving along professionally in a passive kind of way.” The shock of 9/11 (and his awful proximity to it) prompted some decisions: “I realised that if we don’t fulfill our potential, we have no one to direct our attention to but ourselves. We can’t use anyone else as an excuse for what we don’t try as hard as possible to fulfill. That’s what I discovered: A light bulb went on, and there was really no turning back.”

Naturally, not everyone is jolted by such a terrible shock; others might simply have a general sense that all is not well. “Triggers don’t have to be so dramatic,” says Cohen. “Sometimes, we are aware of the turning points; other times, they may be a little more subliminal. They may be cumulative over time.” But these points happen to many of us, he notes: “I have worked with thousands of folks over the years who have wanted to make a change in their careers.”

That sense is perhaps particularly profound in financial services today, with the banking sector worldwide facing either scrutiny or decline—often both. “Not everyone on Wall Street is enormously wealthy,” says Cohen. “There are large numbers of folks who are doing OK but didn’t hit the home run they were expecting to. Combine that with the lack of stability on Wall Street now, on both the buy and

the sell side. The fact is it’s a rocky landscape, which has led to a lot of dissatisfaction.”

Kim Ann Curtin is an executive performance coach and the author of *Transforming Wall Street: A Conscious Path for a New Future*. A lot of what she deals with revolves around people’s sense of self-worth and fulfillment, which often goes missing in the middle of a career. “You get to 40 or 50 and you’re no longer willing to tolerate your lack of engagement” with a job or career, she says. “You finally say, ‘What about me?’” People may have taken jobs initially to help out family, to feed the kids, or to pay off student debt. “There are so many reasons people find themselves in careers that don’t really meet their needs. There’s a reassessment that happens halfway through life.”

Both Cohen and Curtin insist that the financial services profession isn’t inherently more likely to create this feeling than any other profession. Both say they have worked with countless professionals who are, as Curtin says, “in it because they love it” rather than simply because they’re pursuing the maximum amount of wealth in the shortest possible period of time and then retiring. Nevertheless, finance jobs can mean long hours and high stress, which can lead to other problems. Curtin talks often of people needing to “get their basic needs met,” including compassion, security, and connection; if two partners, for example, are both working crazy hours, “by the time they get home, nobody’s

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getting their needs met. You end up in a spiral of dragging yourselves out of bed every day. And apathy is what happens: just a feeling of being neither here nor there. Companies are filled right now with people that feel that way.” She recalls one survey saying that 50% of American workers are unengaged; another says 67%.

If so many of us are listless and drifting and unsure of what to do about it, what’s the solution?

Cohen and Curtin take different approaches to this problem. Cohen is practical, while Curtin is more introspective, even spiritual. Cohen notes that if someone wants to change career (or at least direction), “you have to have a community that knows who you are and how good you are”—basically, you have to put effort into networking in the space you want to move into.

“We have to learn to embrace change rather than fear it,” Cohen adds. “Whether or not we find it disruptive and unpleasant, it’s going to happen anyway. The goal has to be to understand its application and make it part of your vocabulary, part of your story, rather than feeling like it implies failure.”

Fame Changers

Alan Bean was at an impasse. A true pioneer of space exploration, Bean had become the fourth man to set foot on the Moon from Apollo 12 in November 1969 and had then set an endurance record when he spent 59 days aloft on Skylab in 1973. Soon after, he was all set to train for the new space shuttle programme, but something didn't feel right.

He had a feeling that he was neglecting his true passion: painting. And he also sensed that he was in a truly fortunate position.

Bean's change in life has been enormously lucrative, both financially and emotionally. Mixing moon dust from his mission patches in with the paint and using a cast of his moon boot to add texture, his paintings are so irrefutably unique that they sell for tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars apiece. It has allowed him to feel fulfilled about a passion that continues to drive him in his 80s; it makes him feel that he has made a timeless contribution to the commemoration of the Apollo era; and it has

I heard from Apollo 8 astronaut Bill Anders, who was on the first mission to travel to another world, orbiting the Moon on Christmas Eve 1968, about how transition was so easy for him that he considers his subsequent corporate career as CEO of General Dynamics far more significant than his space-hopping days.

I heard from Al Haynes and Jan Brown, the captain and the chief flight attendant, respectively, on the *United 232* air crash in July 1989, about how they had managed to rebuild their lives by finding positives amid the trauma—Haynes by delivering a talk about the incident more than two thousand times, Brown by devoting the rest of her days to seeking federal child seatbelt reform.

And former Lebanon hostage John McCarthy, incarcerated with Terry Anderson and others for five and a half years, explained how, far from reviling the Middle East, he instead built a career in journalism through a unique understanding of its complexities—much of which knowledge had been forced upon him while he was chained to a wall.

Many of the people in *No More Worlds to Conquer* were not trying to process a moment of achievement but one of tragedy or misfortune; one of the most impressive things about them was their ability to create positives out of absolute darkness. Russ Ewin, thought to be the last man alive who was ever held in the notorious Sandakan POW camp during World War II, says that the prisoners taught each other what they knew: He, an accountant, taught chicken farmers how to do the books, and they in turn taught him to raise chickens. Everyone enriched the knowledge of the man next to him.

Each of these people is bonded by a lesson that also applies to the corporate world: the sense that life and career need not be defined by a moment or even a single path. Although each of them will always be best known for one thing, the diversity of their encore acts should give encouragement to all of us that it is within our scope to do more than one thing with our lives.



"When I was training to fly, I began to say, 'Wait a minute. There's young men and women here who can do this, but I'm the only guy who's interested in art, who cares about art, who can celebrate this great human achievement in paintings,'" he told me from his studio in Houston.

This insight was the key to his decision. "I said, 'If I can learn to paint better, that's what I need to do,'" he explained. "They're not going to miss me at NASA. The other astronauts are as good or better. But if I don't do this other job, it isn't going to be done."

And so he quit NASA and became a painter. But in the almost half century that has followed, Bean has only ever painted one thing: astronauts on the surface of the Moon.

made him rich, which is by no means a certainty among Apollo alumni. But all the same, one can't help but smile at Bean's decision to make an absolute change in life only to remain happily anchored in the memories of his previous existence. Making a change in your life can take many different paths.

I interviewed Bean for my book *No More Worlds to Conquer*, for which I sought out people who will always be known for a defining moment and asked them what they did to move on from it.

I asked Nadia Comăneci, who at the age of 14 scored the first perfect 10 in an Olympic gymnastics competition, how one finds direction when the event she will always be known for took place before she reached puberty.

Cohen also counsels against being brand obsessed. “There are plenty of other great firms besides BlackRock and Goldman Sachs,” he says. Failing to realise this is limiting. “Small may be better for some individuals. It might be the right environment, allowing you to achieve more.

“There is a belief sometimes that when you are invited to meet with an institution like Goldman Sachs or BlackRock, you’re being invited to meet with the Pope. Well, it’s a great honour, but that doesn’t mean you should change your religion.”

Curtin’s advice starts with self-acceptance and an understanding of what’s going on inside. She talks about acknowledgement and emphasis—“acknowledging that what they’re experiencing is valid and appropriate, sometimes with a certain amount of grieving, anger, and resentment.” She encourages people to understand that they have a right to feel that way about being trapped in a job or situation they don’t like and then to work out just what it is that they need and aren’t currently getting. “Everything we experience in our life can be transformed if we do internal development,” she says.

This can be useful for someone stuck in a job they can’t really leave, whether it’s because there aren’t other options or because they’re entrepreneurs. In either case, “they need to be part of what transforms the way the organisation does business,” Curtin says. She talks about a school janitor who held himself with such self-respect that it became upwardly infectious to others, despite his status on one of the lower rungs of school employment. One of the interviewees in her book tells a similar story about a parking attendant who sings opera to customers as they depart. “How can individuals do the same in firms? It’s in the way you write an email or interact with the receptionist. This is how you tell people who you are and how you operate.”

Entrepreneurs who *do* sell and get out have a whole other challenge: working out what to do next. “We’re going to see more and more of this as time goes on,” says Curtin. “It’s critical to find a place that makes you become alive, that makes you think, ‘The world needs me.’”

“What gets you out of bed in the morning?” she asks. “If you can find those contributions that are easy for you to make and if you can match those up with great needs, that’s when the whole world changes. What this world is in need of is people who are fully alive.” And that, she says, is not the same as making a lot of money.

Cohen, while not dismissing dissatisfaction or a yearning for change, does encourage people to be realistic. “Work, for virtually everyone, has some element of dissatisfaction, even if your work is your great passion,” he says. He hates invoicing and administration, for example, but recognizes that it is part and parcel of an existence that he loves. “The first step is making sure you are regularly evaluating how you feel about what you’re doing. Have a series of questions you ask yourself to get a pulse read on what’s going on. Do these questions tell you [that] you have a high level of satisfaction? And if not, what’s causing the dissatisfaction?”

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“Our experience is never static,” he adds, “which means that we need to be aware of how our needs and moods may be changing over time. We may once have loved what we do, but we are perfectly entitled to be able to explore new directions.”

DECIDING FACTORS

Though no two situations are alike, every story offers interesting lessons.

Take Gayle Buff, for example. While it sounds like a radical change to have gone from being a psychiatric nurse to an investment manager, the decision involved a series of incremental and practical steps. When she realised that she wanted to know more about business, she enrolled in an MBA course without giving up nursing. “The nice thing about being a nurse is you can work odd hours to mesh with an MBA programme,” she says. Having done that, she thought at first that she would launch a business based on her hobby of antique buying; lacking capital and being financially conservative by nature, however, she needed another path. Then she heard about the CFA Program.

Having decided she liked the sound of financial planning, she set up a small business and started out teaching and consulting with a client base she knew: hospitals. “I said, ‘Why don’t you give me your benefit package to look at, and I’ll do classes for your personnel to help them make good choices.’”

After a time, her financial planning clients began to ask her to do investing for them directly, and this development led to her becoming an investment manager. So, while it sounds like a drastic shift in career, it actually took place over many years.

“When you read about someone’s life, it seems disjointed,” she says. “If you look at my life, on paper it would look like that. Not everyone goes from psychiatric nursing to business. I didn’t have a career programme in mind.” There is a sense of things falling into place rather than a person making a drastic decision in one day, and for many this can be how a new career path takes shape.

Buff also teaches us that just because you have changed direction doesn’t mean you must abandon everything you knew before. “Financial planning interested me because I was familiar with the one-on-one counselling relationship,” she says. “I decided to meld the two: counselling in finance.”

We can also learn plenty from Amy Ils, CFA, who is now a financial analyst at Lombard Odier Darier Hentsch in Geneva but was for many years an engineer and scientist. In her case, the change of career came not because she was unhappy with the way her career was going but because the right opportunity came at the right time. She had worked at NASA, Fairchild, and for nine years as a staff scientist at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne when she was approached about a bank job in 2000. “It was the tech bubble, and a lot of banks were looking for people with a technical background,” she says. “A friend, who was working at a bank at the time, told me they were looking for someone, [so I] gave them my CV, and that’s it! They took me.” She went first to Pictet & Cie and then Julius Baer, Sal. Oppenheim, and finally Lombard Odier. Ils wasn’t driven by a sense of drift or misplaced talent so much as by the desire to seize an opportunity she hadn’t previously considered.

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“As a scientist, the research I was doing was very interesting,” she says. “I was happy there.” Ils’ career change was driven by more pragmatic matters of job security and money. “In science, it is very project based, and you’re never sure you’re going to get the next project. A lot of the time you feel insecure—that you only have a job and a project for two years.” The money at that time was a whole lot better in finance, too, though she says the gap has narrowed a lot since then.

Ils, like Buff, learned how to use skills from her previous career in her new one. In science, she had been used to hard data, facts, and testing a model; the shift to financial analysis, which is at its heart about forecasting, was difficult. “In the beginning, I felt very insecure about my forecasts because they were not based on real data,” she says. To get comfortable with it, she turned back to science. “I told myself I should just take it as game theory, about probability: the probability of this company having these revenues or margins in the future.” That helped. And even if there were doubts, she forced herself to be realistic about her previous life. “Sometimes, like in 2008 when the markets were not great, I would think, ‘What am I doing? I could have done great things.’ But a lot of the time in applied science you are sitting there in a lab being frustrated. Once, I spent three years trying to improve a process, and it didn’t work. There are positives and negatives to both professions.”

KEEP GOING

“Career Alchemy,” *CFA Institute Magazine* (June 2016) [www.cfapubs.org]

Career Success: Navigating the New Work Environment [www.cfainstitute.org]

“A Truly Global Service,” *CFA Institute Magazine* (March 2016) [www.cfapubs.org]

Clearly, confidence is helpful when striking out, and both Buff and Ils seem to have it in abundance. “I never thought I couldn’t do it, which was helpful,” says Buff. “I’m not sure why I thought that. I was going into a world I knew nothing about. But it never occurred to me that I couldn’t learn and master it.” And this is an important point: Any change requires a willingness to learn, often from scratch, which not everyone is willing or able to do. “I think it’s healthy to learn new skills,” Buff says. “It keeps you alive. It keeps your brain working.”

Moreover, she notes, “I’m a very conservative person, but I’ve always been open to risk—and those two things aren’t mutually exclusive.”

THE HERO OF YOUR OWN STORY

Some people have change forced upon them rather than seeking it out themselves. There is no shortage of misfortune in the corporate world, and finding positivity in a negative experience is challenging.

One of the nastier agents of change is unexpected redundancy, which for some people can be truly debilitating. “A lot of unfairness happens in this world, especially in the corporate environment, and you’re sometimes going to get a raw deal,” says Curtin. “The people who struggle less in working out what is next for them are clear on what their values are.”

And if the loss of the job has been a consequence of a mistake a person has made, Curtin points out, “they’re going to need to learn to forgive themselves, and that comes back to their ability for self-compassion.”

“Our identity can be deeply enmeshed within the larger identity of the institution,” says Cohen. “If you have drunk the Kool-Aid and suddenly the organisation you have embraced and believed in decides they no longer want you that can shatter one’s sense of self. A lot of people have defined who they are in the world by who they have worked for.”

In this situation, Cohen says, “The first thing to do is to take a step back and take a breath. The tendency is often for folks to want to do something immediately. I tell people to take a little time, not to worry about being viewed as less valuable.”

Haste in finding a new job is often driven by a misconception. “There is a view on Wall Street that you have a date stamp on you if you have been out of work for a while, an expiration date,” says Cohen. “But none of that is true if you’re confident in yourself.”

Whether overcoming a job loss or just taking the next step, Curtin recommends “seeing yourself as a hero of your own story: as someone who has much more going for themselves than they realize.”

Chris Wright is the author of *No More Worlds to Conquer: Sixteen People Who Defined Their Time—and What They Did Next*.