

changing

go for
IT!



Most of us have more than one friend because our emotional needs are complex and can't be fulfilled by a single person. One size, one friend and, often, one profession does not fit all.

I'm what people like to call a "career changer," although I did not change as much as I found a series of professional opportunities that allowed me to express my true self. Using an analogy familiar to my clients, a career is like a string of pearls: Your interests, capabilities and passions are the string that holds the pearls together. Each pearl is precious, beautiful and complete, but is only truly realized when linked with the others.

In college I started as a pre-med student. Following my father's death in my freshman year I changed my major to philosophy, hoping in it I would find answers to the incomprehensible. It was the right choice at the right time. I was nominated for several academic awards, became the first undergraduate in the department invited to take doctorate-level courses, was accepted to several prestigious universities for my Ph.D., and – not soon after receiving acceptance letters – decided it was time to do something else.

Philosophy meant limiting my future to teaching and writing, neither of which excited me enough to devote decades of my life. So I went about making a list of what I did well and what I liked to do, and realized that I was a classic "left brain/right brain" person. Analytical and creative, methodical and spontaneous, tactical and strategic – a true jack-of-all-trades, a generalist. What a curse, I thought; employers always seem to prize specialists.

After months of research, architecture started to emerge as a viable choice: the marriage of art and science. I arranged a series of informational interviews with

Photograph by Allison Shirreffs

lanes

What's the right career path?
For Beth Zimmerman, the most rewarding journey came from taking many roads.

New York area architects, and their enthusiasm confirmed my decision.

The following academic year I entered a three-year Master of Architecture program at Carnegie-Mellon University. The volume of work was so overwhelming I never had time to consider if both halves of my brain were engaged, but it felt pretty close – even though architecture was decidedly less intellectual than philosophy. For more than a decade I worked as a practicing architect until I felt compelled to add another pearl to the string.


The decision to leave the profession was painful, albeit the right one. As a senior architect I was involved in large corporate projects where the challenges were engaging: What was the ideal building type to address the clients' business needs? How should it be developed to support their operations? What did the clients want to communicate through their new space? What I discovered was that even when the clients' objectives were met, there was often a real disconnect between their new space and every other way they conveyed who they were to the world. Their environments made little sense when compared to other ways they conducted business, from how they answered the phones, treated their employees or communicated with their customers. I wanted to be the person who looks at all of these things and develops a holistic view – and a strategic plan – of how they should hang together.

I spent nearly two years arranging informational interviews with the kinds of companies I suspected did what I wanted to do: marketing and advertising agencies, image consultants, communications companies, brand consultancies, and one-of-a-kind design firms that seemed to get their hands into just about everything.

Initially it was difficult convincing potential employers that I could do the

work; they saw me only as an architect. So I refocused my CV around major skills – complex problem solving, business development, project and team management, and client relationships. Previous employment and education were listed at the end. It worked. I quickly landed a job at a small branding agency in New York and moved on from there to become a senior strategist and client liaison for a large global brand consultancy.

Now as founder and principal of my own strategic marketing consultancy,

Cerebellas LLC, every part of the process – including every “job” I ever had – made sense and prepared me in some way for what I do now. My firm thrives in the interstitial areas between marketing, sales and operations. I still don't think of myself as a career changer, and I don't believe what I did was transformative. Rather, I found or created opportunities that enabled me to express my profound curiosity in a broad range of subjects, not allowing the confines of a single job or profession to limit me. 

Creating a Career Portfolio

1. Don't expect friends and family to always understand or support you. In their eyes you might be “throwing away” a great career. If they love you they'll come around eventually.
2. Embrace a little bit of fear; it forces you to ask if you are making the right transition at the right time – for you.
3. Do your homework and ask for informational interviews. The people you meet through this process can serve as a sounding board as you consider new ventures, and might help broker important introductions.
4. Refocus your CV around relevant skills, capabilities or accomplishments if presenting your experience in traditional format isn't working for you, or would otherwise be a detriment.
5. Try to find opportunities that allow you to exercise as many of your skills and passions as possible; they'll be more rewarding and will have more shelf life – until your next adventure.
6. Expect disappointments and learn from them whenever possible.
7. Stay committed.
8. Repeat steps 1-7 as often as you like, and enjoy yourself!