

Conscious Careering



Transferring your skills to a new career sounds great in theory, but how realistic is it in actual practice?

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If you've ever considered changing careers and have poked around in the conventional literature on the topic, you'll note tremendous emphasis placed on the importance of "transferring your skills" into new industries and job roles. In today's world, however, is this realistic? To what degree are skills, strengths, and qualifications truly "portable" between various professions?

In my opinion, these kinds of transfers are getting increasingly harder to pull off, largely because the nature of work itself seems to be getting more and more specialized. This trend closely parallels what we've all witnessed in the consumer market, where, once upon a time, people ordering a cup of coffee were content to be handed a chipped mug or Styrofoam cup containing just about any hot, brownish substance. These days, however, the average beverage order at Starbucks is comically long, involving multiple exotic adjectives related to wetness, dryness, milkfat content, bean origin, and the like. We've all become so accustomed to getting exactly what we want, when we want it, that employers have adopted this same attitude as "labor consumers" and are inclined to focus only on hiring those people who offer relevant, proven skill sets—not merely a list of generalized strengths, abilities, or aptitudes.

Let me share a few pointers, therefore, to help prospective career changers achieve success:

Recognize that transferring skills gets harder the higher up in the corporate ladder you go. While this should make logical sense, I consistently encounter folks who believe they can transfer their skills from one industry into a totally different industry *without taking a significant pay cut*. In reality, such lateral moves are very uncommon, especially for mid-career professionals seeking to maintain incomes that approach or exceed the six-figure mark.

Why is this the case? The best analogy I can offer relates to how skills translate between various types of sports. When you think about it, there are numerous athletes at the high school level whose raw talent allows them to excel in a wide range of different sports such as baseball, basketball, football, and track. At the school where my wife works, for example, the same small group of students tends to dominate

virtually all of the athletic teams the school puts out on the field, based on the "transferability" of their strength, stamina, and coordination. At the collegiate level, however, the competition gets more intense, with only a few multi-sport athletes being gifted enough to land spots on multiple team rosters. Fast-forward to the professional ranks, and it's almost impossible to identify *any* athlete competing effectively in more than a single sport. Bo Jackson aside, there are dozens of pro athletes (e.g. Michael Jordan) who have discovered the hard way that their raw athleticism doesn't "transfer" all that well into returning a Federer serve or hitting a 95mph fastball. At this level of the game, just like in the upper echelons of the job market, years of specialized skill-building are usually required to compete for positions effectively.

Build your career exploration efforts around the two attributes employers value most: skills and industry knowledge. When assessing the various traits you have to offer an organization, I'd recommend that you downplay "passions" and "natural strengths" as useful data for charting your next career path *unless* you are able to start over in an entry-level assignment. I know this sounds harsh, but these items just aren't effective door-openers when it comes to pursuing mid-level jobs. Few employers will cough up \$70,000, for example, to a candidate who is passionate about their industry but who has no marketable experience under their belt. Instead, focus on isolating your most *well-developed skills and proven industry experience*; these economic drivers will be the most reliable beacons to follow.

If you are thinking about making a career change, start planning early. Given the above realities, professionals today are advised to adopt a more practical, long-term perspective in terms of pursuing improved work satisfaction. People burnt out on their current field, for example, should seek to engineer a career shift over the course of several years, not several weeks or months. This longer time horizon provides the runway necessary for an individual to research their options carefully, launch some targeted networking efforts, shore up their financial reserves, and obtain critical new educational credentials and certifications.

At the end of the day, these new realities are neither bad, nor good; they simply are—and meaningful career change is still well within the grasp of those folks who embrace and adapt to these dynamics, instead of fighting the tide!

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