

5 secrets of successful career changers

By Carolyn Bigda and Donna Rosato

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(Money Magazine) -- Tolstoy wrote that unhappy people are each unhappy in their own way. The same can be said of American workers today.

In a bleak survey out earlier this year, the Conference Board reported that job satisfaction was at its lowest level in more than two decades. And the sources of employees' unhappiness ranged across a broad spectrum of misery, from job insecurity to meager pay.

Maybe you feel it too: the weariness that comes from doing more with less, the nagging feeling you could get a pink slip at any time, or the futility of being unemployed and unable to find work in your field.

All this unhappiness has a lot of people rethinking their paths. Nearly 50% of job seekers recently surveyed by employment site Monster.com said they wanted to make a career change; 89% said they'd consider it to find work.

To figure out what such a switch takes, Money interviewed dozens of people who successfully moved to more stable, satisfying careers in the midst of the worst (though slightly improving) employment market in nearly 30 years. We've zeroed in

on five whose smart strategies could help you too.

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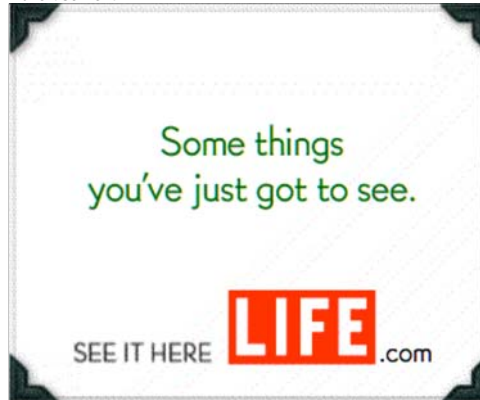
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Secret 1: Show how your talents translate



May 18, 2010: 8:18 AM ET

Laid off from her job as head marketer of an IT firm last year, Cynthia Curtis knew where she wanted to go next: into green industry. "Investment in it was expanding, and there weren't a lot of people with years of experience clamoring for jobs," she says. Curtis also had a personal interest, having built a green-certified home.

What she didn't have was experience in the field. But working with a career coach, Curtis learned how to apply her marketing skills to the green industry. "I had to hone what I could bring to the table," she says.

By seeing where she shone. The career coach had Curtis complete an assessment to help her identify her strongest skills. "You get a picture of what you should be leveraging," Curtis says. Besides reaffirming her marketing prowess, the exam showed

she'd do better at an established company vs. a startup.

By getting to know the field. Curtis set up informational interviews with green professionals to figure out which area of the industry to target. She ended up focusing on clean-tech companies, figuring she could draw parallels from her IT experience.

By making the connection. Curtis redid her résumé to include her eco-friendly home and the trade groups she'd joined. She asked her contacts about challenges the industry faces, then built on that in her cover letters. In applying for a job to help software firm CA build a reputation for sustainability, "I discussed how I could raise its visibility as a green company," she says. That helped land her the gig; she started in April.

Focusing on "transferable skills," as Curtis did, is a good way to make a transition, says Randall Hansen of QuintCareers.com, a job-search resource.

Can't afford to hire a career coach to help you identify these? See if your college's job placement office offers assessments, or use

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the resources at careeronestop.org and onetcenter.org. Then enter your key skills in the keyword search of job sites to see where they're needed.

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Secret 2: network outside the box



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After 12 years at the same tech firm, Dave Cunningham got the first pink slip of his working life last July. Married with three kids, he wanted to stay in Wichita. But with few tech companies in the area, he knew that would mean an industry change.

"Once I got past the awkwardness of being laid off, I got pretty aggressive about networking," says Cunningham, who was already active in 15 LinkedIn discussion groups and multiple associations and boards.

By reaching out to key people. To find another six-figure job, Cunningham targeted his highest-level contacts across industries. "I figured they'd have insight about their company's hiring plans," he says.

By scheduling face time. Cunningham requested to meet in person. "People connect better over pancakes and coffee

than e-mail or phone," he says. He talked up his project- and quality-management skills and asked who might have opportunities requiring those talents.

By casting a wide net. Cunningham didn't stop at "professional" contacts -- he got word out through his running buddies, his church pastor, and the parents of his kids' friends. Within weeks, he had leads on three jobs: at a hospital (from a Rotary Club connection), an energy company (via a LinkedIn contact), and an aerospace engineering firm (from his son's schoolmate's parents). He interviewed at all three and got the last one, a general manager position that pays comparably to his old job.

In today's hypercompetitive market, career switchers need a foot in the door, says Diane Darling, author of "The Networking Survival Guide." To make contacts, start by seeing if anyone in your extended network on LinkedIn.com works in your dream field or job.

If so, ask your common connection for an

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introduction -- that way the person will be more receptive to your request for a chat over coffee. Also, join trade associations, and get to know members by volunteering on a committee or at an event.

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Secret 3: get the skills you need on the cheap



PHOTO: PAT BOLNER

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Laid off for the third time in two years in 2009, Mitchell Smith decided it was time to take his career in a new direction. Smith had spent the previous 15 years selling educational software around the San Francisco Bay area. Over that time, however, it had become increasingly difficult to convince budget-beleaguered schools to invest. "I wanted to be in a job where I felt like I was making a difference, but I also wanted a more stable career," says Smith.

He was intrigued by solar-panel technology, especially after hearing how much government money was being directed to alternative energy. But with two school-age children still at home, Smith didn't have a lot of time or money to invest in training for a job in this field. So he looked for quick and dirt-cheap ways of getting the skills he needed.

By identifying his skill shortfall. Smith, who had been a training manager for a construction firm earlier in his career, knew area firms were expanding into solar-panel installation for homes and businesses. To make contacts, he attended several conferences and seminars on green building. After talking with people at the events, he realized that it would be hard for him to get a job without earning a solar certification.

By seeking out subsidies. Through a counselor in his city's employment office, Smith discovered a five-week solar-installation training program that helped him earn the certification he needed -- and it was free to unemployed residents of the area.

By billing his old employer. Smith got tuition assistance as part of his severance package. So he mined that benefit to help pay for a train-the-trainers course at Ohlone College, which taught him to teach others how to put in the panels. That course in particular helped Smith land a job earlier this year as a training manager and job-

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placement coordinator at Solar Richmond, a nonprofit focused on residential panel installation.

"I took advantage of every opportunity to get the skills I needed, and it paid off," says Smith. "In total I only spent a few hundred dollars to get thousands of dollars' worth of training." He earns considerably less than he did -- \$50,000, down from \$85,000 before. But he has the potential to earn more, as he's working on the side to help a solar-installation firm win bids. Besides, he says, "I love what I do, and it's a lot more secure."

For many occupations, specific certifications and training are required. Even if such credentials are not mandatory, however, they may make you a more attractive candidate -- especially if you don't have on-the-job experience, says Kim Bishop, an executive recruiter in New York. To figure out what you need, review job postings and do informational interviews at firms you're targeting.

As Smith was glad to discover, you may be able to get training at reduced cost, especially if you've lost your job. Start with city and state Department of Labor websites -- at which you can find no- and low-cost government-sponsored programs. Also, professional associations and trade groups often provide inexpensive development workshops, and many community colleges offer low-cost courses aimed at folks ages 50 and up.

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Secret 4: get your finances in order



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Lorenzo New spent 15 years working in the mortgage industry, his last stint at a subsidiary of Lehman Brothers. By 2007 the business was changing, "and my blood pressure was through the roof," he says.

So, reviving a long-held dream of working as a diplomat, he applied to the State Department's foreign service -- a career move he knew would likely require taking a serious pay cut.

By getting the salary scoop. In doing research on the State Department site, New found that foreign service salaries start in the mid-five figures but can eventually reach six figures.

By doing a cost-benefit analysis. At Lehman, New made \$150,000-plus. So joining the foreign service would require a lifestyle change. But single and mortgageless, he figured the adjustment

would be worth it: "This isn't as lucrative, but how many jobs allow you to live all over the world?"

By laying the groundwork. While still working at Lehman, New cut back on meals out and vacations; later he downsized his apartment. After months of interviews and exams, he was accepted into the foreign service in May 2009. New -- who reports to his first overseas post, in Taiwan, this month -- says that having gotten used to living on less made it easier for him to adjust to the lower government salary.

The reality is, most career changers must take pay cuts, at least initially, says Catherine Jewell, author of "New Résumé, New Career." So know what you're likely to earn before you get serious about a move. (Get an idea at PayScale.com.) "Then assess whether it's realistic for you," says financial planner Ellen Siegel. Not sure? Try living on the lower income six months before making a switch.

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PHOTO: PAT HOLNAR

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For 15 years Jamie Pollack did graphic design and branding for financial institutions. Then came the credit crisis in late 2008, and there went her job. Right away, she began looking for another position in her field. And on the side she continued to run Shark Savers, a shark conservation nonprofit she'd founded three years earlier.

Nearly a year into Pollack's unemployment, a contact she'd met through Shark Savers asked her if she knew anyone who'd be interested in a nonprofit job that involved building support for a campaign to end overfishing. "We were thinking of a mutual friend," recalls Pollack. "Then I thought, 'Maybe I should try it.' "

By broadening her self-view. Until that moment, "I'd thought of Shark Savers as a

passion, never a job," she says. She'd seen herself solely as a designer. "But because of Shark Savers, I'd accomplished a lot more."

By using her connections. Pollack asked the woman who told her about the job -- and who used to hold the position herself -- to pass along her name, which Pollack credits to helping her land an interview.

By recrafting her pitch. During that interview, she tied together her branding and outreach experiences. "I talked about fliers I created for Shark Savers, and how I could target those for specific audiences." The hiring manager was convinced.

"One of the biggest mistakes transitioners make is not considering skills attained in the rest of their lives," says Laura Gassner Otting, a recruiter for nonprofits.

So think about the things you do outside work -- hobbies, volunteering, social groups, and others -- and whether you might leverage any of them into a job. Talk to contacts made in your pastime about how you might turn it into full-time.

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