

Use unconventional strategies to reinvent yourself

More and more people are seeking major changes in their lives and careers, i.e. to reinvent themselves in some way. Whether it's at the stage of the so-called mid-life crisis or later, when the conventional age of 'retirement' arrives, the prospect of this change engenders feelings of confusion, loss, fear and worry.

According to [Herminia Ibarra](#), one of the great authorities in this field, no one has worked out how to avoid the turmoil of career change. What we do know the transition usually lasts much longer than we expect at the start – it's between three and seven years in most cases. And those who have been through it know that a true change in direction is actually quite terrifying. We sense we want to take the leap, but we get stuck. We are ambivalent and fearful. If I do it, I fear for all I will leave behind. And, if I don't do it I may miss out on what could have been.

The challenge

The core of the challenge of reinventing yourself lies in finding a way that increases our probability of successful reinvention. And in doing so, reduces the angst and increases the joy and satisfaction of our working life.

In this short [video](#) Ibarra discusses ways in making career change less stressful.



Two basic ideas

Successfully changing career depends on two basic ideas:

Idea 1. The type of work we do, our customers and peers, the stories we tell about work life and our hopes and aspirations define our identity as a working person.

Idea 2. Changing career means changing our working identity and consciously managing the transition process.

Ibarra points out that these two ideas taken together turn most of what we all assume is the best way to change career upside down. Her research shows that the conventional is less likely to succeed; adopting unconventional strategies makes success more likely.

The conventional way is linear, Analyse–Plan–Act. First know what you want to move to and then using that knowledge, execute a strategy to achieve your goal. Analysis and planning is done introspectively based on self-reflection, use of standard questionnaire and career counsellors. Once we understand who we are, what we are good at and what we want, and then we can search for options that match our profile. Only once a match is made, do we make a move.

Career change does not follow the conventional path

The unconventional way is to make changes by practical doing, not first thinking and introspecting.

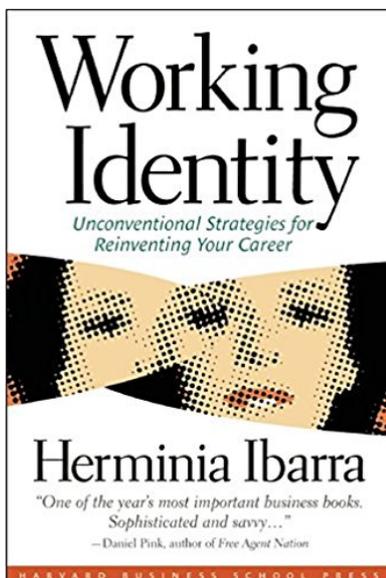
This is how you use unconventional strategies to reinvent yourself. As Ibarra puts it, we need to 'get out of heads, we need to act'.

Herminia outlines a range of unconventional strategies as non-exhaustive examples of how to do this.

Unconventional strategy 1: Do not try to discover yourself by introspection, act your way into a new way if thinking and being. Change what you *do*. Try different paths by acting, then seeking feedback to learn and act again. In other words, experiment by iteration. Example: Take a new job for a short secondment.

Unconventional strategy 2: Stop trying to find your one true self. Focus on all the possible selves you could be, test each in turn and learn what may, and what will not work for you. Example: Seek out people in the roles that might work for you and interview them, visualising yourself in their place.

Unconventional strategy 3: Allow yourself a transition period, as long as a few years. During this time, move in and out of jobs, hold on, and then let go. Live with the ambiguity; better the temporary discomfort of uncertainty, than premature resolution and failure. Example: Scale back the job you intend to eventually leave, and take a second job on a limited basis. Rotate this until you find what works.



Unconventional strategy 4: Resist the temptation to start with a *big* decision that changes everything in one fell swoop. Go for small wins with incremental gains that lead to deeper and more profound change. Don't expect to get it right the first or second time. Make sure you apply what you learn as you go. Example: Take up a hobby that could lead to a business opportunity or join a community organisation that has a commercial arm that you might lead in the future.

Unconventional strategy 5: Focus on the people in new situations as much or more than on the work. Find people who are similar to what you want to be and who will help you transition, but don't expect to find them in your current social circles. Example: Seek out a role model who you admire as a person and request an opportunity to shadow them for a day. Do this several times.

Unconventional strategy 6: Don't wait for the crisis to strike. Start preparing now by identifying and talking with others about everyday occurrences to finding new meaning in the workplace. Example: Test and modify your own story against these events and observations. What are you learning about yourself as you modify your story?

Unconventional strategy 7: Take time out. Step back. When you are stuck, take a day off. Example: Go for an excursion into the country and find a different perspective. Take off the blinders of habit.

Unconventional strategy 8: Finally, be prepared for and open to the unexpected. Example: A 'left field' opportunity drops in front of you. Stop! Take a close look and explore it. Don't apply normal criteria – what would your family and close friends think? Rather say, where would this take me in a year?

Conclusion

Growing as an adult, including make major career changes, requires questioning and commitment. These unconventional strategies will help you question and drive your commitment to make the change when you find what you are looking for.

Read more about this

Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career by Herminia Ibarra. Harvard Business School Press, 2003.