



Seven Ways to Overcome the Fear of Making a Career Change

Bold new professional aspirations often freeze us in our tracks.

“I was afraid I would fail,” explained Sean Lafleur, a former Google executive who went on to found a consulting and coaching firm, during a presentation at a recent **career conference** organised by the INSEAD Alumni Association France. The two other panel members, Sandrine Limal, a consultant turned architect, and Marina Niforos, an economist now enjoying a multi-pronged career as an advisor, non-executive director and blockchain expert, echoed Lafleur’s sentiments with similarly strong terms: “stepping out into the cold”, “being afraid to jump”, “fear of being alone”.

Self-doubt and fear form a common refrain for professionals going through career changes. In this blog, we use our experience as career coaches to decipher the negative reactions that besiege so many when contemplating big shifts and to help you achieve your career dreams.

Research on stressful life events has shown that changing to a different line of work ranks just below the death of a close friend. There are concrete reasons for this fear, including the risk of failure and worries about loss of social status or income. As the panellists referred to the fear and stress that marked their own change journeys, we realised that many professionals do not speak openly about their fears – and wind up even more stuck. While fears cover a broad array of feelings and emotions, they often result in a sense of “paralysis” or, in milder forms,

self-doubt.

Fear, freeze and fog

The fight-or-flight response to stress has been studied since the 1920s, but a third possible reaction to threats – the “**freeze response**” – has received the attention of scientists in recent years. In our coaching, we commonly observe a fundamental fear that leads to lacking the energy to do anything. You may feel powerless and unable to move forward. Fortunately, neuroscience gives us a reassuring reading of this reaction: Most mammals freeze for a few milliseconds to assess a situation before making their next move. Freezing thus serves a purpose and you should see it as instructive.

During the Q&A session of the conference, both delegates and panellists repeatedly mentioned the sense of “fog” experienced by people in transition. This fog often appears at peaks of uncertainty and moments of self-doubt. You may suddenly feel unsure about your purpose, career goals and inner motivations. Or you may feel uneasy about making decisions, such as where to go next and what to do. Clearing the fog may be associated with accepting the concept that a change in career tends to bring about a shift in identity.

Dissipating the fog

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Here are some steps based around helpful tips from our insightful career changers to help you work through the fog.

1. Understand your fear and see it as an ally

Don't try to ignore your fear. It serves a purpose and can be a great teacher or motivator. But it should not block your decisions. You need to face your fear, assess it and see it as an ally. Ask yourself: "What am I afraid of?", "What risk am I taking by changing careers?", "If the worst happened, what would I do?" and "What could I do to minimise the risk of the worst-case scenario?"

2. Know yourself deeply

In our book *Disrupt Your Career*, our **4E framework** to navigate career change starts with "Explore". This means taking the time to know yourself well, understanding your values, motivations, strengths, interests and lifestyle expectations. Allowing yourself to dream and create a positive vision of your career aspiration helps you develop litmus tests to define what you want and whether it's worth the trade-offs it will involve.

3. Take small steps

Setting small goals is a great approach to overcome paralysing fear. Create small experiments to build your 'risk muscle' and keep track of them in a journal. Lafleur provided informal coaching to other Googlers before making the leap to full-time coaching. Check to see if your company would allow you to run similar trials. Aside from steering you into action, this step moves you into information acquisition mode, builds your confidence and confirms that your career scenario is what you want.

4. Remember that change is a constant – and failure can be positive

Put things into a broader context and don't forget that nothing is forever. Tell yourself that rather than having to make one big decision that will impact your entire career forever, it's really numerous small decisions mostly through experimentation. Even if things go wrong, remember that failure doesn't have to be negative. Think of it as feedback about what you need to improve. One misstep can be an opportunity to find more information so you can make better career decisions in the future.

5. Shout it from the rooftops

It can help to tell everyone about your plans. Identify people who have the job or the experience that you seek. Tell your network "I'd like to do this. Do you know anybody in that field?" and ask for an introduction. You never know where help may come

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from. Limal had a project offer even before starting her architecture studies, so she was able to combine hands-on experience with her studies.

6. Enlist social support

It also helps to have social support. Niforos mentioned that she had help from her family and she also hired a coach. Surround yourself with people you trust. Ask them to be your sounding boards and cheerleaders, or to give you advice and emotional support. Almost without exception, the career changers we interviewed and coached were successful when they put energy into this activity.

7. Just do it

At the end of the day, just do it. Remember that not taking a decision is also a decision and sometimes it's the worst one. As Limal shared: "If you have an intuition that there's something that you will miss out and not try in your life, do it. Do what it takes to just try it, because regretting not doing something is worse than just failing."

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Antoine and Claire are the co-authors of **Disrupt Your Career: How to Navigate Uncharted Career Transitions and Thrive**.

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