
Making the Change



By [Herminia Ibarra](#), Professor of Organizational Behaviour with [Shellie Karabell](#), Editor-in-Chief

Forget planning and networking...it's a sure-fire way to remain stuck!

“It’s interesting to note that the Chinese ideogram for crisis has two key characters,” says INSEAD Professor of Organisational Behaviour, [Herminia Ibarra](#). “One stands for opportunity and the other for danger.”

Ibarra is describing what it’s like to face a career crossroads: that fork in the road where you don’t like where you’re going but can’t figure out how to take that other road. Confusion, fear and worry get in the way of opportunity.

“You say to yourself, ‘if I don’t make a move now, I’ll regret it later, it will be too late ten years from now,’ but at the same time fear of the unknown, of leaving behind what one has built, what one has accomplished, of getting off the path one has chosen, holds you back,” Ibarra explained in an interview with INSEAD Knowledge.

We’re not all Paul Gauguin, the Impressionist artist who ditched a lucrative banking career to flee to the South Pacific and paint full-time. (Today his paintings are priceless; at the time of his defection from the nine-to-five

world, bourgeois Paris was shocked.) Often we may want to make a change but are afraid of what comes next. Ibarra says you don't have to make a BIG change to get the process started.

No big leaps

“Try not to take that big (“Gauguin-tuan”) leap that solves everything all at once,” she explains. “Try not to introspect until you're blue in the face trying to find what your true self is because there isn't one.”

Ibarra's research into why people stay stuck, published in Harvard Business Review in December 2002 (“[How to Stay Stuck in the Wrong Career](#)”) contends that we have many selves. “While these selves are defined partly by our histories, they are defined just as powerfully by our present circumstances and our hopes and fears for the future,” she writes. The “selves” we hope to become, or even fear to become, are at the heart of the choices we make regarding changing our careers. “We only change when we have enticing alternatives that we can feel...”

You came out of an education and are supposed to know your vocation. Your vocation is fixed, and maybe ten years later you find you are not a teacher anymore or you're not a painter anymore. It may happen. It has happened....Gauguin decided at a certain point he wasn't a banker anymore; he was a painter. And so he walked away from banking. I think we have a right to change course.
(Anais Nin)

To reach these conclusions, Ibarra studied 39 people aged 32-51 with an average age of 41 over a period of three years in her research; 65 percent of the participants were men. They represented people from diverse sectors: business management, law, finance, academia, medical science and technology.

“To make a true break with the past we need to see ourselves in a new light,” she continues...“and when it comes to reinventing ourselves the people who know us best are those most likely to hinder rather than help us.” She also eschews going the traditional route of headhunters and mentors: mentors are likely to see you in a supplicant role, while headhunters will place you in jobs which your CV shows you are qualified for, tethering you to the past. If you want to find something new, you need to go

beyond your inner circle.

“Experiment,” Ibarra says. “Take on projects, do things on the side, play around with a business idea on the weekend, get involved in an industry association, take a course... anything that takes us outside our comfort zone and our mundane, routine daily activities. If you’re feeling stuck, there is much you can do that doesn’t mean you’re quitting your job tomorrow.”

Take one of the subjects of Ibarra’s research, “Susan”, a partner in charge of the strategy practice at a top consulting firm who – wanting a change and consulting a headhunter – accepted a top strategy job at a Financial Times 100 firm... and found herself back in the same situation! She quit in no time, set herself up as a freelance consultant, and used her contacts to explore new fields. Today “Susan” is putting her strategic expertise to work with non-profits, and loving it.

This sort of process can take three years or so. “It can take a while before these little steps actually lead to a path that’s going somewhere,” Ibarra cautions. “There’s a little serendipity in this, but it happens to those who allow it to happen: meeting a person who becomes a business partner or a mentor or a new boss or a role model. This is critical but it won’t happen if you stay in your day-to-day routine. So I guess the key factor is to create a little slack in your schedule so you have time for the unscheduled.”

Live Longer, Change More

Ibarra points out that change is becoming more important, more prevalent in the working world of today. “We live longer. At forty you’re looking at least another thirty years of productive work time, and many people go longer. So the idea of doing something for thirty more years, if it’s not challenging or not something you’re passionate about, is really appalling.”

Our expectations of what we expect from our work have changed, too. “It’s no longer just the meal-ticket,” Ibarra opines. “We want to have meaning, we want our job to be fun and challenging, we want to have work-life balance. The amount of expectations we have piled onto our jobs and careers is rather large.”

If you’re thinking these situations are faced primarily by the industrialised-world worker, you’re right: most of the research on career crisis has been done in the U.S. and in Europe. “As far as I can tell, you need a few things in

order to have a full-fledged, mid-life [career] crisis,” says Ibarra. “First of all, you can’t be worried about feeding your family; this kind of crisis depends upon a concept of self-actualisation which is, in fact, quite Western, whereas in other societies which might be more collective, your ultimate goal may not be to make the most of YOU but to make the most of the family.”

Nevertheless, even self-centric Westerners will worry about paying the mortgage and supporting their families, and the prospect of change is, by nature, unsettling. “You’re constantly setting up this ‘Yes, but I can’t’ scenario,” chastens Ibarra, “as opposed to taking some small steps that might allow you to investigate the possibilities in a realistic way – perhaps in non-committal ways – but in ways that can lead you to a better solution.”

Ultimately, Ibarra’s research shows that people fail in making career changes because they go about it all wrong. “We like to think that the key to a successful career change is knowing what we want to do next then using that knowledge to guide our actions,” she writes. “But studying people in the throes of career change crisis led me to a startling conclusion: change actually happens the other way around. Doing comes first, knowing second.” Eventually, if you lose yourself in something you find interesting, you will find yourself.

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