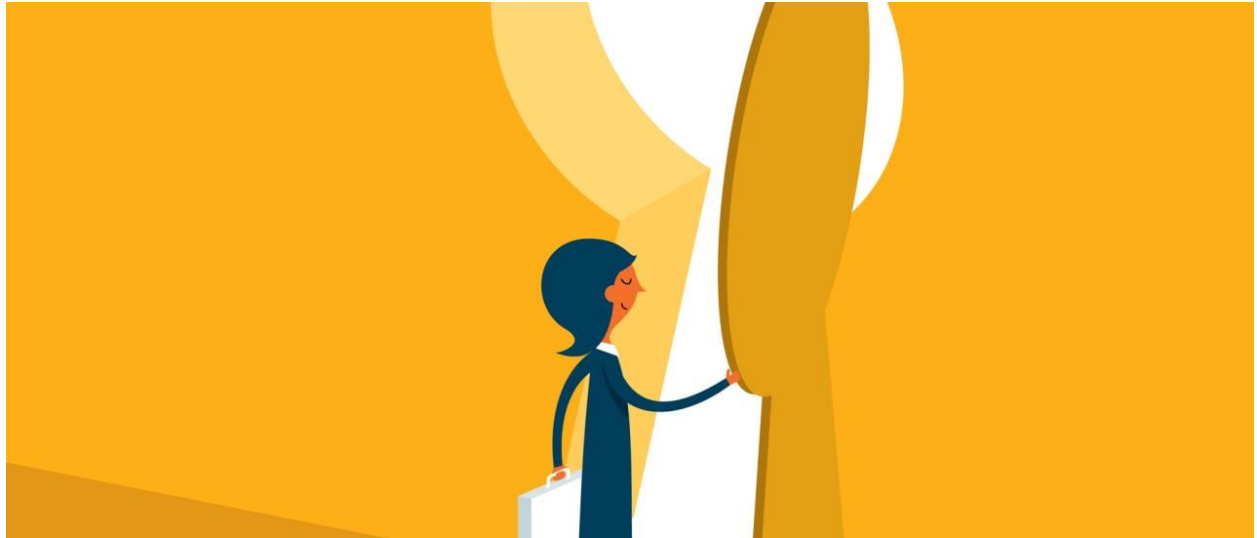

Getting Your Foot in the Door When Switching Industries



By Claire Harbour (INSEAD MBA '92J), Culture Pearl, and Antoine Tirard (INSEAD MBA '97D), NexTalent

Here's how you can prevail against unimaginative recruiters and employers.

Born to a Dalit family, Megha was raised in Southwest India and learned English in her convent school. As a child, she aspired to be a fashion designer or a cardiologist, but her parents insisted that she become an IT engineer.

After four years of higher education, Megha found a job in the booming technology sector. Over the next six years, she worked as a technical engineer and consultant on various projects. She recalls: "I tried to fit into the normal life of an engineer; however, something inside me was saying that I was not in the place where I was meant to be. I was dissatisfied and hungry."

While exploring new career options, Megha grew interested in the business side of the fashion industry. She saw it as a natural progression since she had a strong foundation in management. In 2011, she heard about an MBA in

international luxury brand management in Paris and applied for it. When the letter of acceptance came, Megha knew she was ready to move to the City of Light, even though she did not speak French.

In the months before her MBA, Megha made sure to learn everything she could about luxury goods. She found a job as a sales assistant at a local luxury, multi-brand store. She interviewed store managers of international luxury brands in Bangalore and Mumbai. By the time she arrived in France, she had a solid understanding of the industry.

During her MBA, she had internships at Cartier and Printemps Paris Haussmann. She also worked on a business plan project for the luxury car market. After completing her MBA, Megha received several job offers. She chose a position at S.T. Dupont, a French luxury manufacturer of lighters, pens, leather goods and other accessories, thus realising her dream.

The growing need for a reboot

Every year, millions of professionals attempt to pull off the same exploit as Megha – with varying degrees of success. While it is common for those with MBAs to make big changes (54 percent of the INSEAD MBA classes of 2017 switched sectors), we see more and more professionals seeking a “reboot”. According to a 2015 LinkedIn survey of more than 10,000 members who took on a new role, 34 percent changed both function and company.

In our career coaching work, we have observed many reasons why people want – or need – to switch industry. Some started out in an industry for its CV-enhancing value, like banking or consulting, or took the first reasonable offer they received out of school. Some were initially attracted to an industry but the reality of that work disappointed them. Others reached a point in their lives where they wish to find more purpose or meaning in their work. There are even career changers who like their current industry, but fear it is fast becoming obsolete.

However, if finding a job is hard, finding one in a different industry can be even trickier. One of the biggest obstacles is employers who don't see how you can transfer your skills into a new business context. Whether through sheer laziness or a lack of imagination (or courage), recruiters naturally tend to hire candidates who tick all the boxes in the job spec, including the perennial “proven track record in the industry”.

But fear not, switching industries is possible and doesn't mean you have to go back to square one. Here are some suggestions based on our extensive career coaching experience:

1. Do your research and be strategic

- Define those industries you'd like to explore. Be clear about what you want. Ask yourself what makes you an attractive value proposition.
- It will be easier if you choose a sister industry. If you are in consumer goods, you could consider a switch to consumer healthcare. If you are in finance, you might go into insurance.
- Target industries that are either growing or more open to non-industry talent. In a 2015 [blog](#), LinkedIn ranked the top industries hiring outside. The internet industry came first with 12 percent of talent hired from a separate industry. Ranked second, venture capital and private equity brought in talent from nearly every sector.

2. Know your core skills and how to articulate their transferability

- Take stock of your skills and identify which are transferable to your target industry and roles. Any given business function has skills that are considered fundamental and can be transferred.
- Don't forget soft skills like leadership, communication and teamwork. They are often just as important as hard skills and are applicable across industries.
- Make sure you have solid stories describing how you have successfully applied your skills.

3. Network relentlessly

- Stepping out of your comfort zone to make connections is critical to switching industries.
- Ask your current network to introduce you to decision makers in your field of choice. Your contacts are likely to be able to help you and are often more than happy to do so.
- Contact and meet people doing the kind of work you want to do. Find out how (or whether) your skills match up. Try to understand how the industry operates and whether its culture welcomes career changers.
- Be patient and keep this in mind: The purpose of networking is not to secure a job immediately, but for you to get a sense of the industry, including its lingo (e.g. terms, expressions, acronyms).

4. Experiment, get trained, be flexible

- Take every opportunity to immerse yourself in your target industry. Ask if you can shadow someone, to observe what a typical work day is like. Attend events sponsored by the industry and follow its thought leaders on social networks.
- Use relevant companies' products or services. Visit their stores, talk to their customers, suppliers and other key stakeholders.
- Look for training programmes that can help you build the required knowledge, skills and network.
- Be open to taking a step back in terms of seniority or salary. Consider applying for positions in smaller companies where opportunities may be more abundant. SMEs may not always have the right talent to promote from within.

5. Show passion, energy and determination

- Ask yourself: "Am I prepared to face the inevitable rejection of this kind of job search and not take it personally?"
- Keep trying. Don't be afraid to knock on doors and tell people why they should hire you.
- Show passion, energy and hunger. Recruiters want to see that you have the enthusiasm and stamina to pull off this transition.

Remember how Megha eventually followed her passion? Not only did she get that first job at S.T. Dupont, but soon after, she was appointed to its executive committee as International Marketing Director - Products & Communication. Although changing industries can be challenging, it can be an exciting decision that will open a broad range of opportunities.

With INSEAD's Frédéric Godart and Brian Henry, the authors have published a case study on the story of Megha: "[Developing a \(Second\) Career in the Global Luxury Industry](#)".

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/getting-your-foot-door-when-switching-industries>

About the author(s)

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