
Pursuing the Arts After a Career in Business



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

How three mid-career professionals leveraged their business skills as they became full-time artists.

“Every child is an artist until he’s told he’s not an artist.” – John Lennon

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, many of us have had time to explore new hobbies. The jokes about sourdough bread or handicrafts abound, and many of us can be thankful for the sanity that artistic activities have provided along the way. Meanwhile, among those who have chosen, or been forced, to pivot in their careers, some have turned to the arts. Meet three business professionals who switched to an artistic career even before the pandemic catalysed such changes. Join us as we explore their motivations, the skills they brought with them and their outlook for the future.

Sumana: From underwriting to song writing

Sumana Arun Kumar is an Indian national who spent her childhood in Yemen, until war struck. She remembers with awe her repatriation at age 11 to a

strange and unfamiliar country that was supposed to be “hers”.

In India, Sumana needed to find new friends. Connection was achieved via singing, as her vocal and performance skills assured her a place in a *cappella* teams that won competitions far and wide. Despite her artistic talents, Sumana made a “sensible” choice at university and studied commerce and accounting.

One of her professors put her forward for a role at a Swiss re-insurance firm. She progressed swiftly; by 22, she was an assistant vice president. Keen to explore the world, she decided to do her MBA at HEC Paris. After graduation, Sumana joined a top insurance firm in Paris, shifting towards marketing and innovation roles.

At the beginning of her seven-year stint in the world of insurance, she was walking in the métro when she heard the beautiful voice of the busker **Vanupié**. After several days, Sumana finally plucked the courage to talk to him. This conversation made her see, on some deep level, that she needed to get back to music, to pick up her guitar and sing.

Coincidentally, Vanupié also came from a corporate background, so his promise to Sumana that “anything is possible” felt credible. She began taking classes with him. For almost four years, Sumana held her corporate job while pursuing guitar and voice training at night (and on weekends). Eventually, she could only improve by actually performing in front of an audience. So, she set out to become a subway artist, like her mentor.

Two years of most weekends spent playing in the métro provided Sumana with the comfort that she was doing “the right thing, despite the ups and downs that made me question everything along the way”. However, a sense of schizophrenia began to emerge, as her weekend and weekday personas felt less and less aligned. She realised that often the “paltry fifty cent coin in the hat felt more valuable than the salary at the end of the month”.

Sumana began an ambitious savings plan to create a financial cushion for herself as she explored the administrative work that would be needed to change her professional status. By the time she announced to her corporate colleagues that she was leaving, she had absolute certainty as to her destiny.

The reality in late 2018 was somewhat more sobering. The notion that she was now a singer-songwriter induced panic instead of a sense of liberation. So, she tackled her work like a start-up, using her skills in brand building, relationship management, partnerships, pricing, negotiation and so on. Sumana is now recognised by the French state as a **professional musician**. She has even begun to perform at corporate events, where her understanding of the business context allows her to fit in and be appreciated.

Her advice for those considering the same move is to set aside enough money now to avoid panic later. Surround yourself with positive friends and family, giving the naysayers a wide berth. Then, commit to taking at least one small action towards your goal every day. Over two years, those daily small actions will add up to more than 700 steps, virtually guaranteeing progress. Sumana has no regrets. Look out for her in the métro, or at a post-Covid concert hall near you.

Oliver: Swapping bonds for cartoons

As a child growing up in the United Kingdom, Oliver Preston would relax by poring over and imitating cartoon books. He also devoured French language comic books like Tintin and Astérix. His tutors recommended the top art school in the country, but his father rejected the idea, possibly because he had been frustrated in his own dream of becoming an actor.

So, Oliver studied geography at the University of Exeter, then went off to work in the City, where he thrived. He started at a well-known insurance firm, insuring rockets, satellites and planes, before moving on to a Japanese investment bank. From there, he joined a bond trading powerhouse.

There, Oliver sensed that the increasingly complex instruments – the derivatives, structured products and mortgage-backed securities – which he was pushed to sell, were “pretty arbitrary, and I honestly wondered if anybody understood them properly, as I certainly did not”. The firm was on a mission to be more like large investment banks, and Oliver felt less and less a fit than before. Sure enough, he was soon invited to resign.

Oliver struggled for a while, despite clients and competitors rallying round and inviting him to interview all over the City. It was only when his outplacement consultant commented about how Oliver’s eyes shone when he talked about cartooning, that he was inspired to write a list of pros and cons and explore a radically new career path.

The pros side of the list was filled with “move to the country”, “get a dog”, “spend my time drawing cartoons”, while there was only one item on the other column: “money”. While Oliver had enjoyed the posh life in the City, he realised it was a train from which he wanted to get off. Boosted by a course on how to start your own business, he became a cartoonist at the age of 33, to the dismay of his father.

Via friends and family, he was closely linked to most of the PR firms in London, and he identified the rest in trade magazines. All agencies received a cartoon from him, and commissions soon flowed for clients such as Moët Hennessy and Marmite. But his was not instant success, and bills needed to be paid, so there were moments of doubt in the early years.

Later, Oliver met his wife and the two set up a publishing house to avoid the abusive fees of traditional publishers. Soon, they added greetings cards and merchandise to their range of books and original cartoon prints. He is frequently commissioned to create “deal toys”, or customised mementos, for big IPOs or acquisitions, leaning on his City connections and ability to create hilarious depictions of the stakeholders involved in such transactions.

Will Oliver ever do anything else? “The drug of making people laugh is far too addictive to give up. I intend to be doing this until I drop!” His understanding of economic principles gave Oliver the confidence to push his prices consistently up. Like Sumana, he recommends first building up a nest egg (think “compound interest”). The largest payoff for him is his continued amazement at how characters develop from a blank sheet of paper.

Kate: Navigating new territories as a novelist

A British national, Kate Medina grew up a tomboy. While studying for a degree in psychology, she joined the Territorial Army (a part-time volunteer force) for five years, first as an officer trainee and later as a Troop Commander for the Royal Engineers. She then enjoyed a dazzling rise at a global military intelligence publisher, reaching the position of managing editor at 25.

Curious about landmines and their devastating effects across the globe, Kate spent a month in Cambodia, far off the beaten track. Overwhelmed by the thought of the millions of mines still in the country, she came up with an idea for a novel, but didn’t act on it.

Kate then pursued an MBA at INSEAD, later landing a prized job at McKinsey. It was both “the best and worst job” of her life. While some assignments fascinated her, she felt like a fish out of water. Still, she made some friends, including a colleague with whom she talked idly about “leaving McKinsey to become writers”.

Lured out of consulting by a dotcom start-up that turned out to be a disappointment, Kate decided to break away and do a master’s degree in creative writing. She was initially rejected as her writing was deemed “appalling”. She found a way in, eventually joining the programme in 2002, and began to improve her technique. Inspirational teachers and mentors helped her complete the manuscript of *White Crocodile*, a thriller set in the landmine fields of Cambodia. However, she failed to find an agent or a publisher, despite knocking “at every door there was in the UK”.

Kate then spent six years lecturing in Strategy at the London Business School, a time during which she had three children. While on her third maternity leave, she re-read her manuscript with a critical eye and set about rewriting it. Her commitment led to a book deal with Faber & Faber. Published in 2014, *White Crocodile* was called a ‘remarkable debut’ by *The Independent*, ‘a stunning debut’ by the *Sunday Mirror* and ‘evocative’ by *The Times*.

Substantial media coverage ensued, due to the subject matter and her career backstory. Her second novel, *Fire Damage*, the first in a series featuring clinical psychologist Dr Jessie Flynn, was published in 2016 to more critical acclaim, followed by *Scared to Death* in 2017.

Aside from her tenacity and creativity, Kate’s career benefitted from her sense of focus. She was able to carry on writing, undeterred by her children “destroying things all around”. Her business analyst skills compelled her to end her time as a series writer and focus on a standalone novel instead. Her hunch paid off, winning her a more suitable agent and a top-level book deal with a publisher.

Kate stresses how “binary” writing is: “I am lucky to have great publishers and decent money, while many have lousy publishers and no money, or have to resort to self-publishing.” Her advice for aspiring writers? Remember the long lead time to become an overnight success. Many writers who succeed are former journalists, who have time and technique on their side.

As Kate points out, writing is significantly more competitive to get into than McKinsey, as decent agents receive over a thousand submissions per week and read less than half a page – at best – before binning most. But for Kate, the gamble was worth it: No more endless meetings for this introvert who much prefers being on her own with her characters.

Eight tips for successfully moving into the arts

1. Experiment for as long as it takes to be convinced that this is what you want.
2. Prepare mentally and emotionally for a huge change in the way others perceive you.
3. Set aside savings as success may take longer than you expect.
4. Be disciplined and persevere; daily small actions add up to big steps.
5. Develop a thick skin, be ready to face greater competition than ever before.
6. Use all your business skills to ensure that your work reaches the intended audience; being an artist also means being a business owner.
7. Become part of an artists' community and create a tribe of followers.
8. Keep your day job for as long as necessary to manage your finances, time and sanity.

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