
How to Find Fulfilment by Taking a Step Down



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Three stories of professionals who bucked the trend and found greater meaning in their work life.

We encounter stories of the great resignation daily. The pandemic has turned the world on its head in many ways, and the possibility to move away from a job that is no longer satisfying towards something more meaningful is tempting for many.

Research indicates that people who value time over money experience greater happiness. But what about those who take an even bigger "step down" in terms of money, prestige, recognition and job stability?

As part of a wider study on radical career transitions and the search for meaning, we spoke to professionals who deliberately and proactively took a step down to carve out a more fulfilling career.

Eight tips for taking a step down

1. When you have a hunch about something being of interest to you, take action

As a little girl, Diane had always dreamed of visiting the Australian outback. So, when the opportunity to relocate from New York to Sydney presented itself, she jumped at the chance. As an established cosmetic marketer at L'Oréal, Diane received offers to continue her career Down Under, but she felt she needed to try something new. While volunteering to help organise an adventure race, Diane began to sense that her future lay in working outdoors.

After a few years of chasing opportunities that interested her, Diane fell into her dream job – a national park ranger. "What makes me happy is being outside," she says. "I get to see snakes and insects and flowers and the seasons. That is gold."

2. Prepare to make compromises along the way and for the unexpected; be humble, ask for help

While Diane's willingness to take on new challenges has led to frequent promotions, she's had to make concessions when it comes to her social life. "My life is by definition isolated," she says. "I have to constantly invent ways to keep sane, happy and balanced beyond the pleasure of the actual job."

But one of the benefits of her chosen career is the sense of liberation it has created. "You try things, you fail, you learn and you bounce back," she says. "There is nobody else to blame – you make do with what you have and create what you can."

3. Never say no to a conversation about a new opportunity; you can always say no to an offer!

For Brandon, a former hospitality and spirits businessman in Barcelona, a business referral led him to the BBC. In taking on an ambassadorial role, he discovered a passion for the world of television. This gave rise to a completely new career as a documentary maker.

When he isn't documenting the people and history of the Catalunya region, Brandon can be found running a bar with his partner, Joan. "Destiny has played its role, and I have allowed things to flow as they should," he says.

"I also had the courage to take the risk of trying something new with no guarantees, encouraged by the serendipity of the BBC showing up and revealing a new passion for me."

4. Choose your moment: consider finances, logistics, studies, support and more, before you launch into the stratosphere

Brandon didn't jump straight into documentary making. Instead, he took a sabbatical to test the waters and began his career with some pro bono work while consulting on the side. To supplement Brandon's income from his television work, the cash flow generated from the bar was invaluable.

5. Don't assume that your passion translates directly into your career, think about it from all sides

Today, Brandon finds the intellectual stimulation from making documentaries that might have been missing if he'd opted to just run a bar. "Everything happened for the right reasons at the right time," he says. "I have enjoyed creating deep connections with a huge variety of people over time, and they have all led to incredible experiences and opportunities."

6. Assume that additional education or training will be necessary, along with conviction that what you are starting late in life is going to be valuable

Former finance manager Charlotte reached a crossroads in her career after a move to Paris and a third child. She resigned from a cushy role at Goldman Sachs and opted for a field that had always fascinated her – nutrition.

With the support of her husband, Charlotte studied to become a nutritionist while raising the children. She says a financial cushion or staying in your current role and bootstrapping part time is key to getting the dream off the ground.

"It's a good test of if you're hungry for it – you will be up till midnight if you really want it," she says.

7. Look for new angles, practice lateral thinking in all aspects of life; they will be useful in your professional life at the right stage

Charlotte enjoys being able to shift emphasis with changing circumstances. While her husband was once in an important corporate role, now he is the founder of a fintech startup, and Charlotte can do more "multi-careering", including doing the accounting for the startup.

8. Listen carefully and tune in to who you are, your values, and your priorities, and follow your heart as well as your head

Charlotte, Brandon and Diane found the courage to chase their dreams once opportunities revealed themselves. For Diane, her journey to the outback felt natural and easy, and in no way drastic or chaotic.

"It flowed and led to what I do today without it being such a hard thing to do. I feel like I am confident and recognise there are still things I don't know. I am very open to what comes next."

The question of stepping down

It is clear there are vastly different paths towards career and happiness, which involve consciousness or clarity about where we are going and why. We've [previously outlined](#) how the process might be accelerated and how the outcomes lead to even more meaning. However, the other overriding conclusion was reflected back to us even before we started writing: the question of stepping down.

While all three cases undoubtedly required financial compromise, none of them felt significant regret on that front. Perhaps they are not stepping down, but rather, up to a completely different level of sense and satisfaction. This sense and satisfaction may be the key that more and more people are flailing around looking for. It is often just in front of you, but perhaps not in the form you might be expecting.

Read an [extended version](#) of this post.

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/how-find-fulfilment-taking-step-down>

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