

Live Your Career Dream: Five Steps to Minimizing Risk

BY SHELLEY ROW, P.E., MBA

Do you desire to make a substantial career shift but find yourself paralyzed with inaction? Does the risk seem too big to surmount? You doubt your courage and fret over lost opportunities.

The German philosopher Goethe said, “Leap and the net will appear.” As someone who has made several “leaps,” like leaving my career to live in France and, later, leaving a twenty-plus year career in government to be an entrepreneur, I applaud Goethe, but believe that his sentiment needs tweaking. My experience is more like, “Prepare, work like crazy, prepare further, leap, work like crazy, and the net will appear.”

In reflecting back, I found five steps that made risk manageable enough to take the leap.

1. Set a Clear Goal

It’s easy to get derailed before you ever start. You think, “I don’t really know what I want.” That’s okay. Ask yourself, “What would you do if you knew you couldn’t fail?” Answer honestly. The only caveat is that the goal be possible, even though improbable. For example, I will never be a prima ballerina. That’s not a constructive goal for me.

What do you want for a career change? Do you want to start your own engineering consulting company? Run a public agency transportation department? Do you want to leave transportation and do something completely different? Whatever it is, write it down as specifically as possible. If it’s hazy, describe the *characteristics* of your future career. For example, describe:

- Where are you working – an office, outside, your home?
- Who are you with – a large group, few people, alone?
- How do you feel – calm, invigorated, challenged, stress-free?
- Who are you working with – citizens, public agencies, yourself, a large firm?

As you write, a picture will become clearer. And, the picture will focus over time.

2. Build Foundations

With a general articulation of the goal, you can now prepare a solid foundation for risk taking. In my experience, that foundation has three parts:

1. Financial foundation;
2. Confidence foundation; and
3. Accomplishment foundation.

Financial Foundation

Everyone has their own comfort zone around financial risk based on family needs, educational expenses, the ability to recover if the net doesn’t appear, and his or her current level of financial freedom. It may take planning and time to prepare financially. At the time I left the government, my husband and I had enough savings that we wouldn’t starve while the business grew. And we were able to reduce debt, which minimized financial risk. Quantify your financial needs to identify the level that feels comfortable. A big change will never be without risk, but you can plan financially and work toward it.

Accomplishment Foundation

A track record of accomplishment makes risk-taking more palatable. Practice attempting things you didn’t think you could do. Rather than, “I can’t do that” try, “How can I do that?” The more you accomplish small challenges, the more secure you become with the bigger ones. I didn’t think I could run a marathon, but with a lot of preparation and considerable training it felt great crossing the finish line! Your challenges may be writing that paper and submitting it for a presentation; volunteering to lead a team that feels just a bit out of reach; or even going back to school. Start building a history of accomplishment.



Confidence Foundation

Confidence grows with every accomplishment. Build confidence in your ability to work hard and conquer fear to achieve small goals. Through experience, develop confidence in your technical ability and your judgment. When I started my business, I was confident I could get a job if necessary, *and* I was confident that my hard work and preparation would ultimately lead to success. Don't be misled by bravado or false confidence from ego. Plenty of people have leapt and there was no net. Instead, you want strong, deep internal confidence where you know that with hard work, preparation, and perseverance, you will achieve your goal.

3. Persevere

As you work toward your big leap, it's easy to become discouraged. A network of constant reminders of your goal is invaluable. Those reminders are slowly and subtly rewiring your brain. The brain

begins to believe in a goal that it sees it every day. It starts to notice opportunities it would otherwise have looked past. The best reminder is action, even small actions. You might research what's needed, talk to those doing what you think you want, or do volunteer work that supports your goal. Slow, steady action builds the financial, accomplishment, and confidence foundations over time.

4. Leap

How do you know when the time is right to take the leap? Develop criteria or indicators for yourself. What needs to be in place for the risk to be reasonable? How much money do you need? What is happening in your life? What experience will you have? You will have control over some criteria but not others. Keep preparing, and you will know when the time is right. As I prepared to leave the U.S. Department of Transportation to start my company, I struggled with the timing. I left when my office and staff were in a strong position; I had studied and positioned my new business; and our finances were reasonably in order. When the time was right, I knew it.

5. Work like crazy

Don't attempt this unless you are prepared to work like crazy. And by "work" I mean the mental, physical, and emotional work that goes into a major career shift. You must be willing to put in the hours and the taxing emotional effort to sustain your effort and maintain your confidence. For me, every day pushes me outside my comfort zone. It challenges me to grow or collapse; learn or implode; be exhilarated or exhausted" and sometimes all of the above.

Whether it is starting a company, running a marathon, applying for the big job, or living in another country, to prepare, work like crazy, leap, and live your dream—well, there's simply nothing like it in the world. **itej**

Want to learn more from Shelley?

Catch her session at the ITE Annual Meeting & Exhibit in Anaheim, CA:

How to Improve Your Productivity:

A Case Study in Staff Improvement

Monday, August 15 | 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Description: All organizations have people dynamics that create challenges. Take a moment to consider the organization you work in. Do people have varying management styles or strong personality traits? Are some people loaded with talent but difficult to work with? Are there people with differing styles who can't see eye-to-eye? Do personality conflicts result in small upheavals in the office? These challenges can result in plummeting productivity. While you may think that you can't change people, this program presents a case study for a real transportation engineering company who took the initiative to invest in staff development. Using a structured, repeatable approach, they reduced time wasted in meetings, improved teamwork and collaboration, reduced reactivity between staff, and increased productivity. Learn their process, the results and the keys to their success. It's not rocket science but it is neuroscience.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand productivity improvements that are achievable from staff development
- Describe process steps to improve teamwork and collaboration
- Distinguish key factors that lead to productivity improvement
- Experience one module of the program that results in improved workplace dynamics

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In addition to consulting in transportation, she speaks and writes on *infotuition*®—the intersection of business pragmatics and gut feel. Shelley's work combines her executive experience, results from personal interviews with 77 leaders, and neuroscience to bring this powerful skill to you. She is the author of four books including her latest, *Think Less, Live More. Lessons from a Recovering Over Thinker*. Shelley holds a certificate from the *NeuroLeadership Institute*, is certified with *DNA Behavior*, and is *President-Elect* at the *National Speakers Association Washington, DC Chapter*. Her work has been published in *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Smartblog on Leadership*, and she is a columnist for *CEO Magazine*. Learn about Shelley's work at www.shelleyrow.com and follow her on Twitter @ShelleyRow. She is an ITE Fellow.