



# HOW TO PIVOT YOUR CAREER

Whether you're dissatisfied with your job or simply seeking a new challenge, KATE BASSETT reports on ways to change direction – and speaks to three people who have reinvented themselves professionally

It's Sunday afternoon. You start to feel anxious and the knot in the pit of your stomach tightens every time you think about work. By the evening, a mini-depression has set in. Your 48 hours of freedom are coming to an end; tomorrow morning you'll have to trudge back into the office, to a job that makes you miserable.

You're not the only one stuck in career paralysis. Britain is home to millions of discontented workers. According to research by the London School of Business and Finance, 47% of the UK's workforce want to switch careers, with around a quarter saying they regret entering their current profession.

Despite this disillusionment, changing careers – or 'pivoting' – isn't easy. Walking away from a robust salary and an established routine into the 'big unknown' is daunting. 'Career changes seem to threaten our most fundamental needs,' says Jenny Blake, author of *Pivot: The Only Move That Matters Is Your Next One*. 'We're afraid that if we make one wrong move, we will soon become homeless and unemployed, unable to fend for our very survival. Perceiving this potential threat to our primary needs, we freeze, flee or fight the nagging voice within us that seeks greater fulfilment.'

Tim Johns admits that leaving his job as Unilever's vice president of global corporate communications to start his own consultancy was 'the most petrifying and liberating thing' he'd ever done. He'd been working for big corporations, including Sainsbury's and BT, for 25 years and had become 'reliant on the mothership'. 'Many organisations create a dependency culture,' he says. 'Pay, reward, recognition, promotion, the working environment – they're all

designed to make you stick. But security comes at a price. You can become trapped by your own success.'

He offers three tips to changing career. First, try to visualise yourself in 10 years' time and jot down what you're doing and what's making you happy. 'The only thing that's stopping you from, say, opening a café in Cornwall, is your own imagination,' he says. 'Think about who you are and what's important to you rather than what you've become.' Second, speak to a financial adviser and get a proper sense of how much you need to earn to keep the wolf from the door. Finally, don't wait until you're in the depths of depression to jump ship. 'No one ever makes good decisions when they're grumpy,' he warns.

Blake, who hopped from a tech start-up to Google to self-employment, reckons pivoting is a four-step process: plant, scan, pilot and launch. 'Think of it like basketball,' she says. 'Successful pivots start by planting your feet – setting a strong foundation – then scanning the court for opportunities, staying rooted while exploring options. Next you start passing the ball around the court, testing ideas and piloting with small experiments, such as job shadowing. Eventually you'll be ready to make a shot, or launch, in the new direction.'

Remember: changing your profession doesn't mean you've failed. In today's 'gig economy', we'll all be swapping jobs more frequently than previous generations. 'Instead of shaming and blaming people for hitting completely natural career plateaus, or calling them a "midlife" or "quarter-life" crisis, we should recognise them as the new normal,' says Blake.

Photography by  
Julian Dodd

## NIA MORRIS

THE FORMER CITY FINANCE LAWYER WHO BUILT A SUCCESSFUL INTERIOR DESIGN BUSINESS

Nia Morris was a hotshot finance lawyer. She joined Linklaters as a trainee, spent six years working as a solicitor and, at the age of 31, became one of the firm's youngest partners. Four years later, she was snapped up by American law firm Weil, Gotshal & Manges and helped to set up its London office. To all appearances, she was thriving. But she had a gnawing feeling that she was in the wrong profession. 'I kept thinking, "I should be doing something different,"' she says. 'I had a constant yearning to do something more creative. I'd open the papers and immediately turn to the art and fashion pages when I should have been reading the finance section.'

Morris's third child Millie came

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along in 1997; she was born with severe hip dysplasia and doctors told Morris that her little girl might never walk. Millie's legs were in plaster for two years and she went through five operations. 'I was married at the time to a partner in another law firm. Both of us had been working flat out but when Millie came along, one of us needed to be at home to look after her. I went on maternity leave – and never returned. That was the catalyst I needed to leave law.'

When Millie was (literally) up on her feet, Morris started to consider her career options. Returning to the City after a long break seemed nigh-on impossible, so Morris



turned to what she enjoyed most: interior design. She'd refurbished her own two houses in Islington and Cornwall, and found she had a natural flair for it. Friends started to commission her. So Morris decided to retrain and signed up to do a one-year diploma at KLC School of Design in Chelsea. 'The course was full time and very labour intensive, plus I was juggling three kids; I didn't have time to feel daunted by what I was doing.'

Morris set up her first London-based interior design company, Nia Morris Design, in 2007, then went on to launch Studio Ohm and Cloud Design Studios,

earning a listing in *Elle Decoration's* Top 10 Interior Design Practices, and being named as one of the *Telegraph's* Best 20 Interior Designers in Britain. She started Nia Morris Studio at the beginning of this year with the aim of establishing a presence in the Cotswolds where she now lives. 'I get such a buzz out of seeing my designs brought to life,' she says. 'I used to just like my job. Now I love it.'

The skills she honed as a lawyer have come in handy: project

management; managing clients' expectations; working to tight deadlines; budget planning. 'You'd assume that interior design involves a lot of wafting around but, in reality, you can't afford to be casual in this industry. Mistakes are expensive,' she says. 'Eighty per cent of what I do now is actually very similar to my old job – I just get paid a lot less! But that doesn't bother me. If I thought money made you happy, I'd still be in the City. My only regret is that I didn't make the switch sooner.' ▶

### DON'T SWAP CAREERS WITHOUT...

'Being willing to retrain. Going back to school gave me confidence and credibility in my new role. And I wasn't the only mature student in the room. Even if you're in your 40s or 50s, there's no such thing as "too late".'

## DAVID ELLIS

PREVIOUSLY IN TECH AND SOCIAL HOUSING, THE CEO OF HARLEQUINS RUGBY CLUB IS PROOF THAT YOU CAN SWITCH TWICE AND STILL WIN

David Ellis was on holiday in 2010 when his wife spotted an ad in the paper for the chief executive role at Harlequins rugby club. Ellis was working in social housing at the time. He had no experience of running a sports club but he was a massive rugby fan; he started playing at the age of six and had been a Harlequins supporter from the age of 17. This job was an opportunity he couldn't ignore. 'My wife showed me the ad and said I should throw my hat in the ring,' he says. 'I knew I'd regret it if I didn't give it a shot.'

This was to be Ellis's second career 'pivot'. After graduating in theology from Durham University, Ellis spent a decade working in commercial roles for tech companies ranging from Mitel to WorldCom. But he wasn't fulfilled. 'I was ready to do something different – something with a charitable purpose. I felt I could do more with my career than just building tech firms.'

Ellis started to immerse himself in the world of social housing. 'I went to ridiculous levels to educate myself in the subject,' he says. 'I'd spend four to five hours each night reading reports on the social and economic impact of social housing, working out how my skills could add value to that environment.' Ellis joined Catalyst housing association in 2006 as group director of business development and he spent the next five years there.

Going from tech to social housing was a big step down financially – but Ellis wasn't fazed: 'I wanted to have an impact and do something that would get me out of bed every morning.' Ellis loved that job – and he'd probably still be there if he hadn't been blindsided by the Harlequins ad.

The interview process for the Harlequins top spot lasted around six weeks. Once again, Ellis crammed for the role – to the



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point where he wrote a report for the board on the future of the club. 'I imagined myself in the job before I was actually in it,' he says. He was also very clear about his strengths. 'I never thought about

the fact I was "pivoting" – that would have been overwhelming. I just focused on what skills I could bring to the table,' he says. 'It helped that I'd worked in social housing and had a background in growing tech companies. Harlequins is a club rather than a pure business; it's driven more by core values than the bottom line. Equally, it needed to be pulled into a more professional and commercial way of thinking.'

Once Ellis got the job, he spent a lot of time listening, watching

and sitting in on meetings, trying to understand every part of the club: 'I was humble and accepted that this was a job I'd have to learn.'

In his five years at the helm of Harlequins, he has increased ticketing revenue by 40%, grown average crowds at The Stoop stadium by 10%, seen record membership levels and doubled sponsorship. 'The club is 150 years old and it still has so much potential,' he says. 'That's like rocket fuel to me.'

### **DON'T SWAP CAREERS WITHOUT...**

**'Playing to your strengths. To use a rugby analogy, Chris Robshaw is an amazing back row player – but you wouldn't ask him to be a winger. Know what you're good at and build on that.'**

# SARAH WOOD

THE FORMER ACADEMIC TURNED SILICON ROUNDABOUT STAR WHO FOUNDED UNRULY

It was the 7/7 bombings in London that prompted Sarah Wood to quit her job. After picking up a PhD at UCL, Wood had spent a year teaching American Studies at Sussex University. She loved the role – but she hated the commute. ‘I lived in Hackney and would spend three days a week lecturing in Sussex. Leaving the kids every week broke my heart.’

Then, in the summer of 2005, London was hit by the worst single terrorist attack on British soil. Wood was on the tube on her way to the British Library in King’s Cross, and just a few stops away from the explosions. ‘I was running late so it was a near miss. There were 52 people who didn’t go home that day. Moments like that show you how tenuous life is; they force you to re-evaluate what you’re doing.’ Wood realised that her two big priorities were a) to be close to her children and b) to make more of a professional impact. ‘I was writing and teaching about the American Revolution but there was a communications revolution going on under my nose. I wanted to be part of that,’ she says.

Her husband Scott Button and his business partner Matt Cooke were selling their analytics firm Connextra and were on the hunt for a new challenge. The trio decided to team up and ‘do something in web 2.0 – we just didn’t know what’. In 2006, they launched eatmyhamster.com, a comedy site based on people sharing and rating funny content (‘it was hard to monetise – we ended up killing the hamster’), followed by Viral Video Chart, ranking the most popular videos across the web. A year later, they launched their killer business, video distribution channel Unruly.

Wood says she celebrated the small wins, like finding desk space in London’s Old Truman Brewery or hiring their first developer, rather than focusing



on the end game. ‘That gave me a sense of progress,’ she says. ‘You can be waiting a long time for the big wins; it’s demoralising.’ She also joined a tech COO meet-up group through LinkedIn to mix with other internet pioneers. ‘We were based in East London in the area now called Silicon Roundabout; there were lots of new companies springing up and a palpable sense of excitement. I tried to embed myself in that community.’

While Wood never completely turned her back on the world of academia – she still lectures at Cambridge University, has an honorary doctorate from City

University and set up Unruly’s pop-up university (‘City Unrulyversity’) – her lifestyle has transformed. And she gets to see her kids. ‘We set up the office so it’s a home away from home; there’s table tennis, Jenga, bean bags. When my son Ezra was sick the other day, I bundled him up in a blanket and took him into work. He hung out in the ‘retreat’. My children are part of this unusual, fulfilling journey and they’ve had the opportunity to travel the world as we’ve grown the business.’

Wood admits that quitting her highly regarded role at Sussex University to run a start-up was a big risk. ‘There was a real possibility that the business might not make any money. I wasn’t sure if I’d cope psychologically but actually the scariest part was right before I quit. Once I’d made the leap, I just got on with it.’

She needn’t have worried. Unruly now has 20 offices worldwide, 300 employees, and was snapped up by News Corp last year for £114m. **MT**

## DON’T SWAP CAREERS WITHOUT...

‘Writing a list. I wrote down all the reasons why I was leaving my job. Every time I had doubts about what I was doing, I’d pull out that list.’