

Why sit and stew? A new life may be just the job

You yearn to swap careers, but know unfamiliar waters can be filled with sharks. **Barbara Oaff** on how you can cut the risk of taking the plunge

Charlotte Pendred has done something that many of us long to do – changed careers. The 28-year old history graduate was in interior design. Now she works with information technology. ‘Professionally, I’m much happier,’ she says.

And she is far from unique. Fifteen per cent of Britain’s working population yearn for a career change, according to a survey conducted by Pitman Training, a skills development company.

But anecdotal evidence suggests that many wannabe career changers are too afraid to put their aspirations into action. Jane Barrett, director of the career-coaching consultancy Workmaze says: ‘Trying to take on an utterly different job, in today’s unpredictable employment market, can seem like a risk too far.’

Yet it doesn’t have to be. It is possible to reduce some of the uncertainty that comes with a career change.

One strategy is to hang on to your day job while retraining for the dream alternative. This is exactly what Pendred did: ‘I went to work during the day and to classes during the evening.’

She is now one year into a graduate IT programme with a utility company: ‘My approach meant I could hold on to what I had while trying to grab something else I really wanted.’

Another tactic is to find the time to do some voluntary work in the industry you would like to enter. This can bring many vocational benefits, says Margaret Burdon, a director of CSV, a national charity that encourages volunteering. ‘It can provide you with experience, contacts and a reference – all are invaluable for making a more secure career change.’

New Zealand ex-pat Rachel Helyer Donaldson is applying this theory. She works in public relations for a television station but wants to

break into documentary making. She has realised that her only way in is to make her own programme.

‘I’ve volunteered the last 18 months’ worth of week-ends to making it,’ says the 30-year-old. ‘It’s been a sacrifice, but I’m hoping the finished product will help me to get an opening with a production company.’

Another route to a smoother career change is to network. ‘This can help you get to where you want to be much faster,’ says Glenda Stone, chief executive of Aurora, a network for professional women.

Stone points out that networking can give you vital information about forthcoming vacancies and introduce you to the people who do the hiring. As always, who you know is at least as important as what you know.

What else can you do to reduce the uncertainties that come with making a career change? ‘Be really sure of what it is you want to do next,’ says Jim Shillady of Kiddy &

Partners, a London-based firm specialising in organisational restructuring. ‘Think hard about your options.’

‘I had no idea what I wanted to do and was too tired to find the answers’

James Fitzsimmons (not his real name) has recently done this. After 14 years in sales he wants to move into human resources. It has not been an easy decision: ‘At first I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do. And I was too tired from working to be able to come up with any answers.’

Fitzsimmons, 36, went part-time so that he could research and reflect on his options. ‘That in itself was scary. There’s a point where you think “Why did I just throw away all that security?” But you get through that.’

For people who cannot afford to



After a career in design, Charlotte Pendred has switched to information technology and she is professionally much happier

reduce their income, there is another possibility – assuming they have an understanding boss. It’s called ‘sunlighting’, where you ask your employer for an extra day off to spend with another company.

Cash heard of a doctor who is also working for his wife’s children’s clothing company, a communications director who is also setting up her own landscape design service, an office temp who does costume design every Friday and a business researcher who ends her working week giving piano lessons.

Learn Direct, an agency that encourages skills development, has studied this trend. It found that sunlighting can help people to make safer career changes because they are able to find out in advance if their perception of a new job matches the reality.

A risk-free career change does not exist. But with careful planning, a risk-reduced one can be possible.