

# CAREER SEARCH AMERICA

CAREER TRANSITION TOOLBOX WHITEPAPER

## CAREER TRANSITION:

PLAN TO WORK AND WORK THE PLAN



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## INTRODUCTION

As with all of life's big changes, a career transition can be a frightening time. When facing the loss of what has become familiar, perhaps over years of dedication and effort, the effect can be very disorienting, even devastating. In 1987, William Bridges, psychologist, consultant and well-known author on the subject of change published a very popular article entitled *Getting Them Through The Wilderness, a Leader's Guide to Transition*. He describes the process as follows:

*Transition is very different from change. Change is situational: the reduction in the work force, the shift in the strategy, and the switch in reporting relationships are all "changes." Transition, on the other hand, is a three phase psychological reorientation process that people go through when they are coming to terms with change. It begins with an ending—with people letting go of their old reality and their old identity. Unless people can make a real ending, they will be unable to make a successful beginning.*

*After the ending, people go into the second phase of transition, the neutral zone. This is a no-man's land... a time and a state of being in which the old behaviors and attitudes die out, and people go dormant for a while as they prepare to move out in a new direction.*

*Only after going through each of these first two phases of transition can people deal successfully with the third phase: beginning over again, with new energy, a new sense of purpose, a new outlook, and a new image of themselves.-->*

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Bridges goes on to state that while transition is a dangerous time it is also a time when "innovations and experiments have an especially good chance of succeeding."

So when it comes to career transition life can be a bit scary, but it also can be exciting. It's a particular example of universal human experience, and the good news is that everything you learn by studying transition in other areas of life is applicable and useful as you move on to your next career.

Let's look at each of these three stages discussed by Bridges as they apply to your career transition.

## ENDING

When a career ends, especially one that you expected to remain in for years to come, the sense of disorientation and confusion can be pretty scary. In response, most people propel themselves into a whirlwind of activities, rushing to prepare resumes, calling everyone they can think of, and, all too often, grabbing the first job that comes along.

What a waste!

It's important, of course, to not just sit on your hands during a career transition, but invest time in understanding exactly what it is you're going through will pay huge rewards. Reflect on what it is you're leaving, what was good about the experience, and in what ways you either excelled or let yourself down. Don't miss this opportunity to gain valuable information about what really matters to you, what you're good at and what you do or do not like.

As things come to an end, take a look around. Decide what's worth taking into your next career, and what's better left behind. Travel light.

Finally, and this is hard to do, avoid "the blame game." Don't waste energy accusing others or, worse, yourself. And don't fall into the trap of thinking that "the world owes you a living." Even if it's true, it's a debt the world will never pay.

Our best advice? Take a "stuff happens" attitude and move on. Your career transition journey is under way.

## THE NEUTRAL ZONE

The neutral zone is a phase in the career transition process which causes most people a great deal of trouble. You may feel like you're treading water. It may seem as though every path you take is a dead end, and there may be times when you begin to wonder if you'll ever figure it all out.

Welcome to the neutral zone! If that's the way you're feeling, you're feeling just the way you should. Our experience with hundreds of individuals going through this wilderness experience in their career transition is that, although on the surface it may seem to be a unproductive and frustrating time, underneath all kinds of good work is taking place.

But it's easy to miss.

In both the first stage, Ending, and in the last stage, New Beginnings, there's plenty for your active conscious mind to do, everything from packing up your desk, filling out paperwork, and, later, creating resumes and cover letters, mapping out a networking strategy, and setting up interviews.

Here in the neutral zone, however, this kind of busyness can be counterproductive. You need time for a thorough reorientation, a chance to re-evaluate long held assumptions and dismantle limiting beliefs. At the same time, there is one type of activity that is perfect for this stage; this is a great time for self-assessment exercises and to begin your research on the more general conditions of the job market and the different careers options that are "out there."

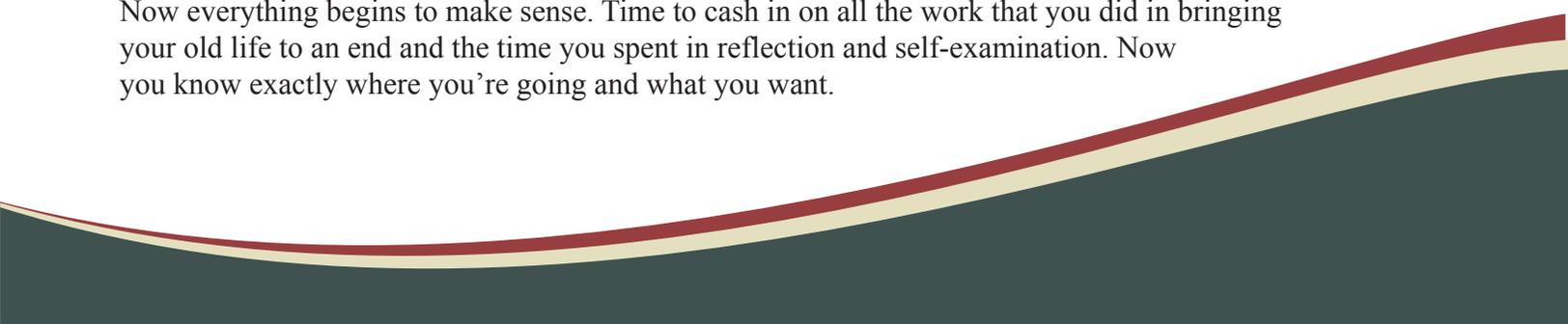
How long does it last, this time in the neutral zone? It varies, of course, from individual to individual. But a full year is not too long. Much better to take the time and do it right than hurry through and end up disappointed and discouraged.

If possible, if you have the financial means to do so, give yourself this time as a gift. Go be a carpenter for a year. Pursue interests unrelated to work and discover just how related they may be. Many have a hard time believing it, but this seemingly unproductive time usually turns out to be critical, pivotal. Career transition through the neutral zone is more than just a change in employment; it's a new course heading for parts as yet unknown.

## NEW BEGINNINGS

Whew! You made it! Out of the doldrums. Moving ahead. It was worth the wait, wasn't it?

Now everything begins to make sense. Time to cash in on all the work that you did in bringing your old life to an end and the time you spent in reflection and self-examination. Now you know exactly where you're going and what you want.



It's time to get tactical. This includes:

- Making plans
- Mapping out and implementing an effective networking strategy
- Putting together a world-beater resume
- Setting up interviews with the gatekeepers for your dream job
- Learning how to nail a job interview
- Negotiating a salary and compensation package that gives you the best possible return on your talent and experience

This phase of your career transition may feel like a destination. After all, it's what you've been striving for since the transition process began. But it's important to remember that in every important respect this is indeed a "new beginning." Sure, use the experience you bring with you from your previous career, but continue to think like a beginner. Beginners don't know what can't be done, so, often, they accomplish miracles. Keep it fresh. Keep it new. It's the secret ingredient of long-term success.

Finally, one of the great rewards of successfully navigating the transition process is the way that this difficult but rewarding experience makes for great leaders.

## SUMMARY

Everything living goes through change, including corporations and institutions. Leaders who understand the three phases of transition have the kind of wisdom that is the hallmark of an outstanding executive. By not fighting the transition process but instead by allowing it to show you your own hidden talents and inner resources, you are now in a position to do for others.

It's what you might call "won-win" situation. There's nowhere to go but up.

Congratulations!

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Understand that transition is a natural process.
  - Educate yourself about the three phases of transition: endings, the neutral zone, and new beginnings.
  - Become familiar with the characteristics of each phase.
  - Give yourself the time you need to do this properly
  - Expect the unexpected and be on the lookout for possibility.
  - Take necessary action, but don't commit yourself prematurely.
  - Trust--don't fight--the process.
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