

Carving Out a New Career Path



Herminia Ibarra

CAREER VOLATILITY has become a fact of life for many professionals: the average MBA graduate will change professions two or three times, and work at six companies before retirement. Still, carving out a new path at work remains an often anxious and unsettling experience, and many are turning

to coaches and career counselors for help.

One unusual approach to professional development is offered by **Herminia Ibarra**, INSEAD's Chaired Professor of Organizational Behaviour and author of *Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003). On April 16, she presented tips for successful career reinvention as part of the ongoing *Rotman Integrative Thinking™ Seminar Series*.

In the course of her research, first as a full professor at Harvard and now at INSEAD, Ibarra has come across many mid-career professionals who are at a crossroads, stuck in jobs they've lost passion for but unsure what to do next. "If you're an educated professional, you're probably used to doing things in a goal-oriented, orderly way, and career reinvention doesn't lend itself to this kind of process. It can seem very unpleasant and chaotic."

For those faced with career uncertainty, traditional executive coaching might appear to make things worse, not better.

"Career counselors tell us that successful career change happens in a linear process: you begin with first knowing what you want to do, then use that knowledge to guide your actions toward the one 'right' job," says Ibarra. "Unfortunately, real life doesn't work that way."

Based on her in-depth research of professionals in transition, Ibarra advises an approach that makes room for experimentation. Her three-part process of career change includes trying out new professional activities, connecting with new social networks, and working and re-working the story we tell ourselves and others about who we are. "How do I know what I want to do if I haven't done it yet?" Ibarra asks. "There is no 'one true self,' waiting to be discovered. Each of us has many selves, some more developed than others, that depend on us to actualize them."

Adding to the challenge, those close to the professional in transition may be less- than supportive during the period of indecision. "Most people have someone close to them telling them they must be crazy, they're taking too much of a risk," says Ibarra. This is why it's important to develop a new narrative that makes sense to others (and yourself) about why the change is necessary, and to expand your circle of friends and contacts. Says Ibarra: "Get out of your usual network, not just for release but for support, to meet people who are in the realms to which you aspire." The result, while challenging and long in duration (the average career change takes an average of three years to complete) is almost always worth it. "Ask yourself, 'Do I want to be doing this in ten years?' If the answer is no, it's time to think about making a move." - BY STEPHEN WATT