Changing Careers

“What happens if, even after all your best-laid plans have been completed, you find yourself wondering about roads not taken? Or the career you had pursued no longer holds the appeal it once had? It may be time to explore your interests, investigate your options and develop a new chapter in your work life. Embarking down such a road may seem daunting at first, but with some advance planning it is doable.

I can’t say that I chose my first career as a caption writer for television and motion pictures; rather, it chose me. After graduating from Harvard in 1987, I turned down a paralegal job at a boutique law firm in Manhattan and set my sights for Los Angeles with no job prospects. I had roommates and friends in the entertainment industry who introduced me to an associate producer of The Cosby Show, who had been instrumental in getting that show captioned by a Hollywood captioning agency. Several more introductions and an interview later, I had secured a job as a caption writer at the same agency.

Once I began writing closed captions for television programs in an office with a dead-on view of the Hollywood sign, I knew I had found my niche: television, Hollywood and making it all accessible to my fellow brethren with hearing loss. As someone who grew up watching programs of the 1970s and 80s (i.e., Maude, Three’s Company and Knots Landing), I always had to ask my parents what zinger Bea Arthur landed or what threat evil schemer Donna Mills made. As a caption writer, I was helping other people like me to gain access to media, and as a result, gain an additional measure of independence.

Granted, not all the programming my agency captioned was of high quality, but that was quite beside the point. We were not in the position of deciding what individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing should have access to. Instead, our goal was to enable them to enjoy the best and worst television and media had to offer and to make their own programming choices just like the rest of America. Although it may be debatable whether people tuned in to Baywatch for its dialogue, we were there to caption every “Help! I’m drowning!” and every “Hold on! I’m coming to save you!”

So my job in closed captioning was a good fit, and for the next 22 years I enjoyed promotions, challenges and lots of wonderful, and sometimes dreadful, programming. In hindsight, however, I stayed at least five years too long. At some point, I began to feel I was withering away on the vine. As much as I enjoyed my job and career, surely there was more to life than editing an endless stream of media. I began to consider career alternatives. I considered psychotherapy and social work, but wasn’t sure if I wanted to pursue it badly enough to go through two or more years of school while being paid chicken feed. My current life was too cushy; I could stay where I was, edit captioned episodes of The Big Bang Theory and collect a paycheck bigger than what I would bring home as an overworked social worker.

Eventually, a changing business climate in the captioning industry forced me to seriously start considering alternatives. I took an UCLA online extension class in two computer programming languages and enjoyed it, but wasn’t sure it was my calling. I eventually landed on librarianship for many reasons, but for me the pièce de résistance was the bonus of being immersed in information and knowledge every day. Just as I had learned something new every day through captioning, I could and would learn something new every day in librarianship. I was sold.

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“Oh, my God,” I thought. “They whisper. I picked the worst career to go into.”

by David Davis
After some consideration, I enrolled in a fully-online Master’s in Library & Information Science (MLIS) program through San Jose State University, the largest such program in the United States. I was, of course, initially concerned about lecture formats and access, but was reassured that the school was prepared to caption materials or lectures at my request. Going through an online degree program had the interesting effect of boosting my confidence as a cochlear implant user and listener – something I’m not sure would have occurred had I attended a bricks-and-mortar classroom. As instructors spoke into microphones while I listened through headphones, I understood not only the instructors but also the students and their questions and comments. In only one class – taught by a professor with an Irish brogue – did I take advantage of captioning.

I remember well my very first day at the reference desk during an internship at Occidental College. Excited, I had lined up my pen and paper pad and had my computer at the ready for any and all questions. Bring it on! A few minutes later, a young woman hesitantly approached the reference desk.

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I now currently work as a reference librarian (if I have to, I tell the whisperers they can use their indoor voice) and faculty member at Woodbury University in Burbank, California. The siren call of closed captioning proved too difficult to resist and I have also returned as a part-time contractor at my former captioning agency. My life now is all about access: to information and to media for people with and without hearing loss.

For those of you who may be considering a career change, here are my suggestions on what to consider:

**Explore**

Evaluate your work-life balance: Are you enjoying your work life? Even if you are, does it feel more like a job than a career? Some people are perfectly satisfied with jobs; others want to carve out a career and a trajectory for themselves. Only you can determine your dreams, goals and needs.

Listen: If you’ve been thinking or fantasizing about switching gears, listen to that voice. What is it telling you? Is it encouraging or discouraging you? Make a list of what you think would be the pros and cons of switching careers versus staying put. Perhaps the new career you’re considering does not pay as well as you’d like, but may offer more personal rewards or lifestyle flexibility to offset any sacrifices you may have to make.

Start small: Don’t be afraid to take small steps: Start with a community college or extension class to learn more about your potential new field/career as a way of dipping your toes into the water before committing to diving in to a longer-term program.

Talk to experts: This seems obvious, but is often overlooked. Don’t be afraid to talk to people in your new field. Ask them what they like best or least about their careers. What are the current challenges they face? In my case, it was good and scary to know that libraries face severe budgetary challenges, especially in the public sector, and often have to demonstrate their value to the community. Many industries are suffering from the current economic downturn and face lackluster job and career prospects; be sure to inquire what the short- and long-term prospects are for your potential new career and how you can best position yourself.

Career testing and coaching: Additionally, there are online and in-person services that provide career testing and coaching to help you navigate your feelings, talents and options. Testing can help uncover areas and fields you may not have considered, while coaching can offer invaluable insight and “homework” to determine your motivations and uncover insights.

**Embark on the Journey**

Investigate what degrees or credentials (if any) are required for you to pursue your new career, and then consider the schools and programs that will meet your needs. In my case, I was fortunate enough to start my program part-time while I was still fully employed. This allowed me the flexibility of getting my feet wet and getting back into the school groove without too much fear of much time or financial investment lost. After one semester, curiosity and ambition propelled me further, and you may be able to enjoy the same flexibility as well. On the other hand, some programs require a full-time commitment from the outset, so it’s wise to become familiar with the programs and flexibility available.
Financing: Regardless of whether your program/education allows you to attend full- or part-time or whether you’re able to work full- or part-time, be sure to look into all financial aid and scholarship options. You may be eligible for educational grants on a government level (federal, state and local) and scholarships as well. Before embarking on my program, I did the math and calculated how much the entire program would cost, what the expected starting salary would be, and was happy to determine that it was well worth the expense I would incur going back to school. Money, of course, is not the only consideration. You may find that it’s well worth student loans and debt if your new path translates to a more rewarding work life.

Determine the program that best fits your needs: Do you want a full-time program that enables you to complete the program as quickly as possible, or does your lifestyle require a part-time program? In my case, I started part-time while working full-time; an anticipated layoff enabled me to accelerate full-time. I also found my online program extremely convenient – The commute to class was just twenty feet and I could access pre-recorded lectures, videos and materials at my convenience, yet professors were available for live classes and assistance. Pre-recorded lectures may allow for more options in arranging access; in my program, some instructors captioned their lectures as a standard practice, but access is provided upon request for uncaptioned lectures, videos and materials.

Nonetheless, there are downsides to attending an online program: I did miss the face-to-face interaction. At my graduation ceremony this past year, a young woman sitting alphabetically next to me turned out to be someone who had been in one of my class project groups. I would strongly suggest making an effort to join local social and study groups if you enroll in an online program. If face-to-face contact is critical, a bricks-and-mortar program would be a better fit.

Whichever program you choose, if you have a hearing loss, it is wise to determine your access needs and inquire of the schools and programs how they anticipate addressing those needs. Instructors and educational institutions are increasingly using online learning management systems where lectures, videos and other instructional materials are posted for students to download and/or view. These materials can be easily made accessible, and the institution should have a policy and program in place regarding access in face-to-face classrooms and online learning management systems.

Find a mentor: Lastly, I strongly recommend finding a mentor. You may have to network to find one, but mentors are invaluable in offering guidance, insight and support as well as helping you see “the big picture” in the field you’re entering. Mentors are familiar with the history of the profession, its direction, and they may help you position yourself competitively for the challenges and obstacles they can see coming before you can. I’ve been very fortunate to have my partner and friends to help me navigate my way into my new career.

For those of you thinking about switching fields or careers, I invite you to go a little bit outside of your comfort zone to explore and meet other people. It’s never a bad idea to stop and evaluate your life, your career and the direction you’re going. Sometimes considering a career change could reveal that you are right where you want to be, and sometimes it could reveal hidden wants and desires and give you the motivation you need to take those first steps towards your next chapter. I wish you luck!

Resources
Career Path offers career planning, tests, advice and resources, such as schools/program databases and a rookie-employer matching database.

International Coach Federation
provides referrals for career and life coaches who may be of assistance in helping you explore your goals and ambitions.

Deaf & Hard of Hearing Professionals
is a group for professionals, college educated, in any field who are dealing with impaired hearing or deafness. Discuss strategies for dealing with the contemporary workplace, offer support, and investigate and disseminate solutions.

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