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Few choose a change of direction

By Dina Medland

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Very few people make a radical change in their career path of their own volition. It involves difficult choices, huge amounts of motivation and a great deal of self-belief.

But a harsh economic climate and changing attitudes to job mobility might be making career change less daunting and no longer just the preserve of the young.

Jonathan Black, director of careers services at the University of Oxford, is an engineering graduate whose career has included senior commercial roles at Booz Allen Hamilton, two international publishing companies, being co-founder and director of an internet start-up, and senior roles in strategy and corporate affairs.

He says: “Engineers are very good people because we know the world isn’t perfect and doesn’t fit well together.

“In terms of my own experience I had no real plan, but an enthusiasm to try different things.”

He has managed to avoid falling for the common mantra aimed at young students: work hard, get into a top university and secure a top job to lead a fulfilled life – proving that it can be done.

For anyone seeking a change of direction in mid-career, there are other successful role models. Kate Donaghy, for example, is a successful headhunter and partner at Manchester Square Partners.

She started off with a “practical” approach to life and trained as a nurse when leaving school. She then studied law but decided it wasn’t for her.

So she changed direction again and trained as a headhunter with Anna Mann for six years.

Today, she headhunts and finds time for an organic farming venture in County Cork in Ireland.

Ms Donaghy says: “Change is very non-linear. You take little bites of various things and it can be trial and error, and you might have to create roles for yourself if you are going to succeed.

As a headhunter, she says: “There is certainly quite a prejudice in firms against career changes.”

This goes hand-in-hand with people's in-built conservatism, which puts them off the idea of a radical change of direction: "I would say that when people need outplacement, not even 2 per cent of the plc-director levels we work with would be willing to take a very radical turn."

Michael Moran, who at the time of writing was chief executive of Fairplace, an outplacement and consultancy firm, says: "In their 40s and 50s people are very driven by their values and interests.

"Often they change direction, but only a very small portion will change career completely, and then it will be because they have a passion they want to explore."

A reluctance to change direction is often dictated as much by concerns over needing to earn a certain salary to maintain a lifestyle as any other fear factors.

Responding partly to growing demand, Oxford university's careers service has begun offering "alumni careers days" exclusively for alumni who are now mid-career professionals and who "would like a boost to their career, or who are looking to change direction".

While most universities offer their alumni a chance to keep in touch regarding a careers service, this appears to be the first initiative of its kind in the UK outside business schools.

Coincidentally, the experience of an Oxford graduate, who left in 2001, provides a refreshing insight into what it takes to change careers, and what the biggest barriers are.

Tarun Gupta left Oxford with a double first in Politics, Philosophy and Economics and headed for the City, although both his parents were doctors.

In eight years in the financial services sector he worked for some well-known names, including Goldman Sachs, Credit Suisse and HSBC.

Today, Dr Gupta works for the NHS in Birmingham and is taking exams to start Speciality Training in General Practice – "given the flexibility it currently offers to pursue interests outside of medicine along with regular clinical practice".

He says: "I enjoyed banking but a part of me always wanted to do something more tangible, a bit more of a vocation.

"It wasn't easy leaving behind a pretty chunky salary, but what was really hard was being a student again, and having the motivation to keep myself going when friends seemed to be getting on with their lives, buying flats etc."

Timing, he says, is very important in considering such a radical change, as is support from friends, family and existing employers – colleagues at CSFB were very supportive.

While Dr Gupta was in the enviable position of having City bonuses in hand, he also had a very clear sense of direction and self-belief.

When it came to choosing his clinical elective studies for the four-year Medicine Fast Track Graduate Entry programme at St George's in London, he chose to do them at Harvard and Yale Universities in the US.

He says: “In the US, most leading Ivy League universities offer joint degree programmes aimed at graduates with a few years of work experience, recognising that some people can and do have diverse interests and abilities and may wish to formally combine those, both academically and professionally.

“This is something the UK lacks at the moment.”

But general practice with the NHS is also well-known, he says, for offering a “portfolio career” in which people combine three or four days of GP work with a day or two of working for think-tanks, advising foundation trusts, teaching at medical schools or even politics.

At just 30 years old, Dr Gupta appears to have picked his way astutely through the minefield of aspirations, jobs and fulfilment.

As he is also president of Oxford10, the alumni group set up for those who left the university in the past 10 years or so, one can only hope he will mentor others to think as laterally, and as fast.