

Working Identity

A Summary

Herminia Ibarra (199pgs, 2003)

1) Reinventing Yourself

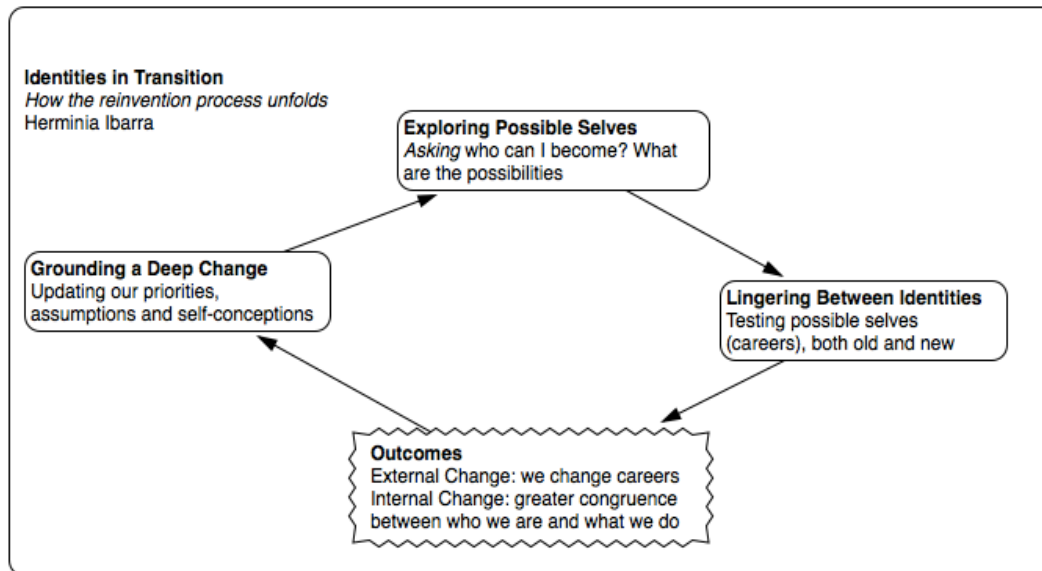
Even when career change looks like a chance occurrence led by random or unexpected events or happenings, certain common and knowable patterns are at work. There are a set of unconventional strategies that can be used to tap into these common patterns. This book details the underlying patterns and lists the strategies that we can use to change our careers.

There are 3 key ideas underlying this book

- Our working identity is not a unchanging magical object that lies deep within us. Rather our working identity is made up of many possible selves, some defined by the things we do and the company we keep (present), and others defined by our (future) desires and private dreams.
- Changing careers means changing our selves (our identity). In moving from one career to the other, we are transitioning from one set of selves to the other. So we are not swapping one identity or set of selves for another, but rather reconfiguring the full set of possible selves.
- There has been a traditional notion that one must first seek to understand their identity via deep thinking and reflection, and then proceed to take any action (job search / talking the headhunters etc) basis that understanding, i.e., you need to know exactly where you are going before you take a step. Today, a more appropriate course of action would be to try new things (talk to people, explore new roles without taking any final calls), get a sense of how it suits you, and then use this information to understand yourself, and then take appropriate actions, and the loop continues taking you closer and closer to your goals.

The old Thinking → Knowing your identity has changed to Doing → Knowing your identity.

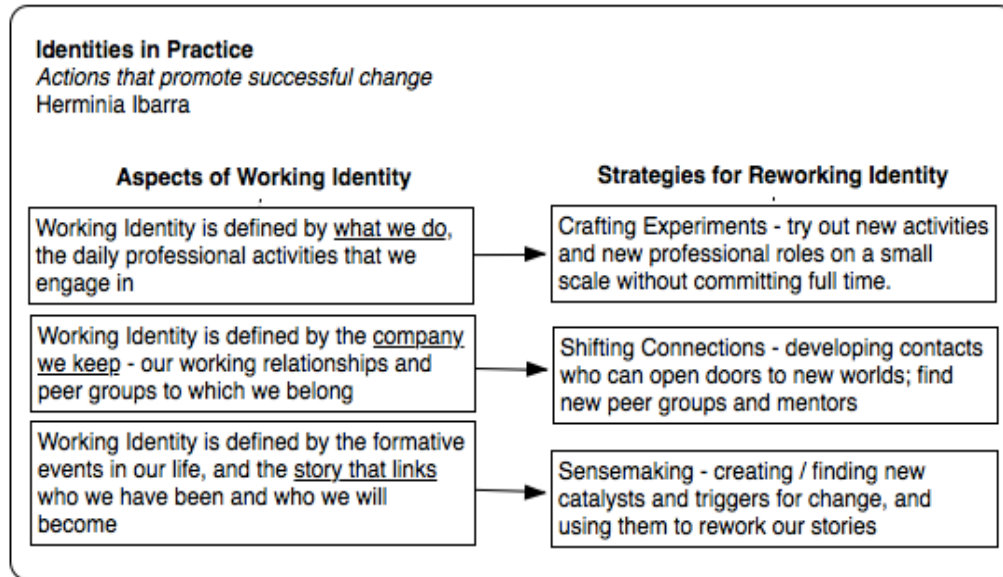
Career changes can be understood in terms of the following model



The model is aligned with the assumption that we will not give up a career path in which we have invested so much of ourselves, unless we have a good sense of the alternatives. To understand these alternatives, a testing phase is needed. This phase is long enough for a person to see fuzzy, undefined possibilities transform into concrete choices.

Our past identities don't change or aren't dislodged so easily. Any change in identities have to involve questioning of key priorities and assumptions about ourselves. And the only way we will tend to examine these assumptions and priorities is when faced with choices. It is only then we really understand they really entail. Hence the importance of testing by lingering between identities.

Our old identities are rooted in our daily activities, relationships and life stories. How do we change them? The model below provides a path.



Triggers of change, as described in the model above are turning points, or occasions of dramatic change; opportunities when old and new selves cannot co-exist and one has to give way.

Part One - Identity in Transition

2) Possible Selves

It is best not to spend a lot of time at the beginning looking inside for the truth. In fact this can even be counterproductive. This is because

- We really understand our identities and the changes in them only when faced with decisions / choices.
- Lots of new info only appears as we start moving and exploring. Planning extensively will not help you get awareness of this info and the self-awareness it leads to; as that can only come from exploring new possibilities.
- Additionally, each new information that we get impacts how we seek and absorb the next piece of information. This iterative learning process is how we narrow down to our favoured career option. Thus our working identity is shaped constantly with every new option or experiment that we indulge.
- The kind of self-knowledge required to make changes in our lives comes largely from social interactions in the process of making change. Thus without playing around with options, we miss this valuable skill.

Thus we cannot plan and program our way into reinvention. It is test and learn that works. Thus it is best that we start flirting with possibilities.

The question “Who am I?” which is what we would start with in a 'plan and program' approach, should be changed to “Among the many possible selves that I might become, which is most intriguing to me now? Which is easiest to test?”

So how does one identify and test a set of possible selves?

- Make a list of what interests you.
- Classify them into conformist or nonconformist roles (or any such taxonomy that you find relevant).
- Bring forth some of the possible selves into the world, by exploring or working on at least one of the items on that list. Just start with one.
- Identifying people who we want to emulate - especially people like us who have done well.

Typically you will find that a possible selves (or possible options) list always has a favourite, typically near the bottom of the list, as if we are fearful of exposing it to the world. Usually this list begins with a reasonable option, where we exploit the past in a new context.

3) Between Identities

The transition phase sees us move between holding on to the past and embracing the future. A phase we are in the process of leaving but not exited our old selves, and have entered something new but not fully. This is a long-drawn and painful period, as we are stretched between the old selves, as our work demands it, and the emerging new selves.

Becoming an 'ex' also doesn't usually happen suddenly. It happens over a period of time. The signs of withdrawal are there early on, years or months before they become explicit. Also, the choices we make in our present role and job around where to invest our time also reveals our desires and interests in it, as well as what our working identity prefers.

The process of withdrawal from the present role may also lead to a mutual withdrawal, as our peers and seniors too start withdrawing themselves from us.

Each of the experiments that we undertake during this phase should ideally lead to different things. One experiment could pay the bills, the other could let you work in a favourite sector, while another could let you do something entirely experimental.

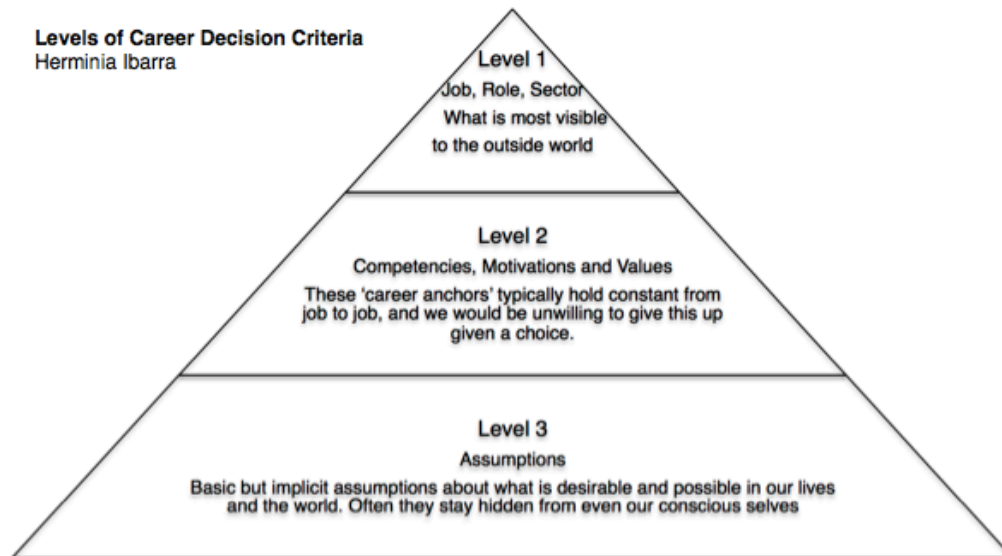
Everytime we meet a new contact during this transition phase, we ask ourselves - “Do I want to be like him / her? Can I be like him / her?” A yes then leads us to explore the connect and possible self deeper.

The explanations or narratives that we offer of our career, trying to clarify our old and emerging new selves, are also critical elements of the transition phase. They are micro-commitments that we make to our new selves. Each retelling informs our story better and clarifies as to why we are leaving our old selves behind.

Those who can tolerate the painful discrepancies of this in-between identities period, when we oscillate between our old and new selves are in a better position to make informed choices. The more time you have better your chances of discovering new selves and thus the better will be your career decision.

4) Deep Change

The difference between a job change and a career reinvention lies in the depth of personal transformation that is largely invisible to an outside observer. A better way to understand this is through the framework of a career choice iceberg.



Assumptions are our underlying mental maps of how the world works. These usually remain implicit and hidden. We usually fail to question our assumptions - even if they are obsolete or wrong. However our working identity will change only when assumptions change. Else the change is typically a job change at Level 1.

The typical assumptions that are resistant to change are

- our emotional relationship with institutions - we ideally need to rid ourselves of an unhealthy overidentification with the organizations that employ us. We are in love / locked by our institutional identities.
- our benchmarks for success.
- our preconceived notions about viable work arrangements.

Learning happens in cycles. The early cycles focus on the most immediate or surface problems. Later cycles lead to the bigger questions, including assumptions. Start slowly by tackling the smaller questions first. Small wins lead to a virtuous circle which give us the confidence to examine the bigger questions. We are not equipped to make those deeper changes until we come to understand what they really mean, not as concepts but as realities that define our daily lives.

Smaller wins thus enhance our capacity to change. We understand certain key truths about ourselves and anchor that with new hypothesis that will guide us in the next phase of our professional life.

Part Two - Identity in Practice

5) Crafting Experiments

Crafting experiments helps you test out new selves by undertaking small projects that help you explore new roles, without any deep commitment. You can use experiments to test known or even create unforeseen roles. Experiments are particularly useful in understanding Level 2 and 3 of our career decision criteria - what really matters to me, what i cannot do etc. These exploratory projects can be side projects (advisory, moonlighting), temporary assignments, long-term educational projects etc.

All experiments come at a cost. They have some impact on our existing selves. Things will never be the same again.

When we evaluate the results of the experiments, we must take our emotional gut responses, and subject them to thoughtful consideration. “Why does my gut say so? Why is it the opposite of what everyone is saying? Is it pointing to something deep in my assumptions (Level 3) that has not been articulated?”

Keep in mind that there is a positive bias with experiments. We may feel encouraged to escalate commitments even when we have evidence that it would be better to take a reality check.

Also it is likely that there will be several iterations before you decide that this is the role for you. You may also see linked experiments, each one generating variety and feedback, and suggesting the next.

As our exploratory experiments point us to a specific direction, we can also do more costlier hypothesis testing experiments - such as taking a sabbatical and doing a 2-3 month full time project, or even an intense part time one.

Ultimately how we allocate our work time is more telling in deed than anything we can articulate in words. “I know who i am when i see what i do” is a well-known maxim.

6) Shifting Connections

Shifting connections refers to how we can find people who can help us grow into our new selves; these are people who we admire, wish to emulate and spend time with.

These are people outside our present circle, for the people who know us best usually hold us back, as they are familiar with our past selves and cannot see us in any other possible way. In this regard, our enduring ties with friends and family members are traps, for they are uncomfortable with changes in us as it disturbs the status quo. It is nearly impossible to change careers without changing our social and professional circles.

Mark Granovetter's weak ties theory says that most people find their jobs through contacts who are distant connections or acquaintances, having interacted only once or twice with them. What makes them useful is not their position or our closeness to them, but rather the fact that they move in different circles and have access to new info, which our old contacts dont.

Shifting connections entails looking for

- new peer groups - typically in the spaces we want to move to; doing new things we wish to do, often experiencing the same doubts as we do
- guiding figure(s) - advisors, mentors, sponsors, friends from whom we learn new ways to live and work. They help provide us or create safe spaces from which we can imagine and try out new possibilities. They also provide reassurance and comfort us that we are on the right track when we waver.
- communities of practice - are an integral part of the test and learn method, because we need a context in which to learn both the substance and style of the new self we are trying to become. New communities also offer inclusion, replace the community that is being lost, offer a safe base etc. If a guiding figure doesn't happen, then a community can provide a similar frame of support.

If we are free to explore any identity that we like, we also need others to complete the same. The new identity remains incomplete without the involvement, and the stamp of approval of a new peer group, mentor or community.

It is a fact that we are capable of being self-reliant only when we feel supported by and attached to trusted others. We want a secure base to explore new selves. However this base should also not be too close to our home base. Our role rehearsals need to happen outside our usual circles as the old audience still typecasts us.

Thus the only way to make a career change is by shifting connections from the core to the periphery of our networks - finding new peer groups, guiding figures and communities of practice; by moving beyond known to unknown networks.

7) Sensemaking

Sensemaking refers to the practice of creating compelling stories that link our past selves and experiences with the future selves we want to become. The story should ideally explain why we must reinvent ourselves, who we are becoming and how we will get there. The story will go through many iterations before it is finalized, improving in each telling, till it emerges as a polished statement of purpose and clarity. Until then the external audience whom we are selling our reinvention will remain dubious of our claims, and we too will remain unsettled and uncertain of our identity.

Typically these career stories make space for

- Alert intermissions - moments when pivotal event catalyze change. In reality it is we who infuse special meaning into these moments. Others may experience the same event and feel nothing. We imbue them with special significance because these are the frames we want to apply to our experiences and help serve the cause of our reinvention.
 - Alert intermissions are forks on the road. They force us to choose one self over the other.
 - Alert intermissions also help us in selling the story of reinvention to our peers and family members, enabling us to justify actions such as quitting a lucrative job etc

- Only when the end is in sight can we recognize a turning point. Alert intermissions therefore come late in the transition process; typically many years into the process of change
- Unfreezing events - these are moments that come early in the discovery process, making it clear that we have to keep the process of experimenting on, and that there is no looking back. The event unfreezes us by challenging a strongly held or cherished self-conception. They signal that the old ways of working have run their course, and that we are now ready to move on to new settings. Examples of unfreezing events include a bad performance review, sacking or even the end of a long project or award.
- Jelling events - these occur much later in the transition phase; they signal that the transition process has been crystallized and the end is near.

There will be periods when we are highly receptive to major change, and periods when even incremental changes are hard to tolerate. We need to act in the 'windows of opportunity' that open up.

Additionally we may need to step back occasionally to obtain a new way of seeing the same situation, akin to creating a new perspective. Take time away from the everyday grind to create a kind of 'break frame' that will help us see the evolution in a new light.

Part Three - Putting Unconventional Strategies to Work

8) Becoming Yourself

It is better to slow down in the testing / experimenting phase. We need to invest enough time to explore all possible selves, including those seeming less promising, and we need time to internalize the self-knowledge that we are accumulating with each experience.

The most typical mid-career problem is trying to figure out how to transfer old preferences and values to new and different contexts, integrating it with our changing priorities and improving potential.

The solution is not the job change itself. Self-creation is a lifelong journey. Only by our actions will we learn who we want to become, and what we need to work upon and change to ease the way.

A set of 11 (9 in the book) unconventional strategies may be distilled to reinvent one's career. They are

1. Act! Experiment, do new things. You cannot discover yourself by introspection.
2. There is no one true self to discover. Rather there are many selves within you that you can explore only by experimenting.
3. Use a strategy of small wins to kickstart the experimentation stage, rather than explore a grand gesture to change your identity in one fell swoop.
4. Experiment via side projects, temporary assignments - nothing binding! Pursue them seriously but delay commitments. Vary your experiences.
5. Find people you wish to emulate and can provide support for your transition. But don't expect to find them in your old social circles.
6. Allow yourself a transition period to live in the contradictions of your selves - the between stage. Do not take decisions in haste. Rather spend time here to explore even those selves that don't seem promising. You may be surprised!
 - a. Remember that major career transitions take 3-5 years
7. Practice telling and retelling your story in different ways, to different people, including skeptics.
 - a. The big turning point comes late in the story
 - b. What you make of events is more important than the events themselves
 - c. Take advantage of whatever events /experiences come your way to revise or reconsider your story
8. Communicate to others that you are changing. Watch out for old routines.
9. Don't linger too long in one state dwelling on unanswered questions. Move on, even if to an interim commitment.
 - a. Limbo states do have their benefits though as they allow you to think through questions subconsciously, allowing time and space between identities etc.
10. Step back occasionally, but not for too long. Breaks help, such as sabbaticals, chunking up vacations etc. Carving out smaller time out periods within a longer fallow period also helps - such as not talking to headhunters or checking out job sites for 3 months, in order to explore a crazy idea or think through an unusual path.

11. Changes happen in bursts and starts. There are times when you are open to big change and times when you are not. Seize opportunities as they come!
 - a. Take advantage of natural windows of opportunities - end of a big project or education course, or assuming a new position, a milestone event such as 40th birthday, alumni reunion etc.
12. Erik Erikson: "Identity is like a good conscience. It is never maintained once and for all but constantly lost and regained."

Keep questioning and committing continuously. Questioning without commitment is the mark of the devoted dilettante or perpetual student, while committing without questioning makes you an 'organization man' who has no identity beyond title and function.

Self-renewal is not a personality makeover. Rather it is a process and practice that allows us to get back in touch with forgotten selves, to reorder priorities, and to explore long-standing or newfound interests. And as T S Eliot said - "...at the end of all that exploring, we will arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."