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CAREER CHANGE PLANNING AT **40**

Q I am married and nearing 40 years old, with one young child and a husband who lives to work. I have an undergraduate degree in accounting, but never went for a master's. I worked at a large financial firm until recently; the work is no longer interesting or enjoyable. I would like to work again, but absolutely not in accounting. I have the option of returning for a graduate degree; I was always a top student, so I thought it would be best to go back for a graduate degree. I just don't know what in.

Because of my age, I feel a sense of urgency in choosing a field. The degrees I've considered typically take two years, but making this decision has become overwhelming. I don't want to make a mistake and spend the next 10 to 20 years doing something else I find boring.

A You may be feeling a bit older now, but you are still at a great age for a career change, even if it means reeducating yourself to enter a new field. As someone in her late 30s, you have what Mina Brown, a 20-plus-year executive career coach and consultant, refers to as a "long runway." She says, "Careers rarely move in a straight line and can be unpredictable." With a solid 20 years remaining in your future of work, you have plenty of time to make some bold choices and take more risks. Of course, planning a career change will usually net the best long-term results. Impulsive choices are rarely a good idea when it comes to changing fields or industries. That also applies to rushing into a graduate program before you know what you want.

Brown's career path presents a good example for many who want to move up in ability and responsibility. As founder and president of Dallas-based Positive Coach LLC and Coach Academy International, an accredited coach training firm, Brown works with senior executives, executive teams, managers and high-potential professionals in leadership, influence, conflict, team effectiveness and career management.

As with most growth careers, before launching her own company, she moved up the ladder of responsibility and became chief financial officer of Aviall and senior vice president and general manager of its aerospace division. She had also held corporate management positions with large companies, beginning with a career



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in accounting at Price Waterhouse. When an upwardly mobile professional wants to further a career, it often means changing companies as well as jobs to support the desired growth.

In *Be Smart: Sail Past the Hazards of Conventional Career Advice*, co-authors Mina Brown and Paula Asinof have determined seven degrees of difficulty to consider before changing a job or a career: location, industry, company size, job function (e.g., accounting, sales), role (e.g., corporate, consultant, small business, solopreneur), compensation and professional or management level.

Each of these variables involved in any career change will add complexity to the process, make it more difficult and take longer to make the move. For example,

if location is not a concern in one's job search, that will create smooth sailing in that category. If the career changer has decided against working for a small company, being offered a position in a small company may be a deal breaker.

Choosing one's values and priorities in advance will avoid confusion when opportunities present themselves. It may not be wise to accept an interview if a company does not meet one's desires for the new job. Creating a list of "I do want" and "I don't want" will help you identify and stick to your values. Brown reminds job changers: "Your job is what you are paid for; your purpose is what you are made for. Ultimately, if a job doesn't help you grow, let it go."