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The Telegraph

Education and careers

Why we shouldn't give up on our career goals as we get older

Covid is shifting our professional lives, but how do you adjust your ambitions in middle age?

By **Rosa Silverman**

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The caption on a government-endorsed campaign poster doing the rounds online reads: “Fatima’s next job could be in cyber. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

This would be fine, if Fatima were a budding young techie who had just accrued mountains of debt while studying computer science. But Fatima is a dancer, pictured lacing up her ballet shoes with the despondent expression of one already aware it might be for the last time.

“Rethink. Reskill. Reboot.” Says the slogan that was roughly translated on social media by demoralised Britons facing employment armageddon as “give up on all of your dreams”.

This is unbelievable. The government is throwing the arts under a bus. #Fatimapic.twitter.com/PuCvV3maMJ

— *Fatboy Slim (@FatboySlim) October 12, 2020*

The poster is believed to have come from a 2019 “cyber first” campaign; but that it has resurfaced now, and [sparked such derision and anger](#), is telling. Amid a recession engendered by the pandemic, jobs and entire careers are on the line. Ministers are bracing themselves for unemployment levels reaching up to four million by Christmas.

Following months of government support for struggling workers and industries, Chancellor Rishi Sunak made an unpopular admission: “I can’t pretend that everyone can do exactly the same job that they were doing at the start of this crisis.”

In other words, while Fatima may not want to give up on a career in dance, the brutal reality is she may have to. The anger sparked by the advert follows hot on the heels of the ridicule attracted last week by the Government’s online careers quiz.

Writers were advised to retrain as sports professionals; a choir conductor was urged to retrain as a colon hydrotherapist; others were urged to consider becoming circus performers, cake decorators or boxers. It’s almost as if a computer algorithm is not the answer to your midlife career change dilemma.

Thankfully, it is not the only option. Last week, the Department for Work and Pensions also announced a new JETS ([job entry targeted support](#)) scheme, under which job hunters will receive the support of a personal work coach, who draws up an action plan.

With this initiative, at least, there is reason to believe they might be onto something. Jobs and careers coaching is not a novel idea, and unlike the Government’s poster campaigns, enjoys a decent track record.

Those who have used a career coach before have positive things to say, and Anniki Sommerville is among them. By her mid-40s, her work involved a mixture of writing books and producing and hosting podcasts. But, as a mother of two young children, she wasn’t sure how she could continue down the creative path while still earning enough to pay the bills.

That was when the idea of consulting a career coach occurred to her. She had interviewed one called Mandy Manners for a podcast episode, and suspected she would like her style. “Some coaches can be very vague and airy fairy in their approach without giving you tangible action pointers,” says Sommerville, 47, from west London.

“Mandy is an author and so knows about the challenges of being a writer and making money from that. So her advice is practical and she can talk with authority about the creative life and how to make inroads.” So began Sommerville’s £75-a-time sessions, which are still ongoing.

Career coaching has been around since the Seventies, and the global coaching industry today is thought to be worth billions of pounds when all variations are accounted for. Search online and you’ll find numerous guides (some more authoritative-looking than others) explaining how to become a career coach. In theory, anyone can call themselves one. But there are professional bodies that accredit both

coaches and their training, making it a viable career option in itself.

Alice Stapleton entered the field in her late 20s after her own career change. She had originally trained as a probation officer, but six months after qualifying realised she didn't want to do this for the rest of her life.

Instead, she did a masters in coaching, accredited by one of the professional bodies. Ten years later, she has clients all over the country. They are "people who know they don't want to carry on what they're doing but don't necessarily know what they want to do instead", she says.

"I help them look at who they are, what their values are, what motivates them, what their interests are and give them that opportunity to think about themselves and what they want to be doing. The ultimate goal is by the end of the 12-session process they know what they want to do. If it's a drastic career change it can take a little bit longer."

One client moved from creative consultancy to floristry; another from fashion sales to food styling. A third quit her job in veterinary nursing and is now planning to run her own café and launch a cupcake business (Stapleton doesn't mention any former clients who went from ballet dancing to cyber tech).

It's a luxury that might have seemed unimaginable to our grandparents' generation, when a job was for life and the idea of pursuing your passion was alien to most. Today, Instagram is full of such mantras. But after graduating from university with a daunting amount of debt and rent to pay, it still may not feel like an option.

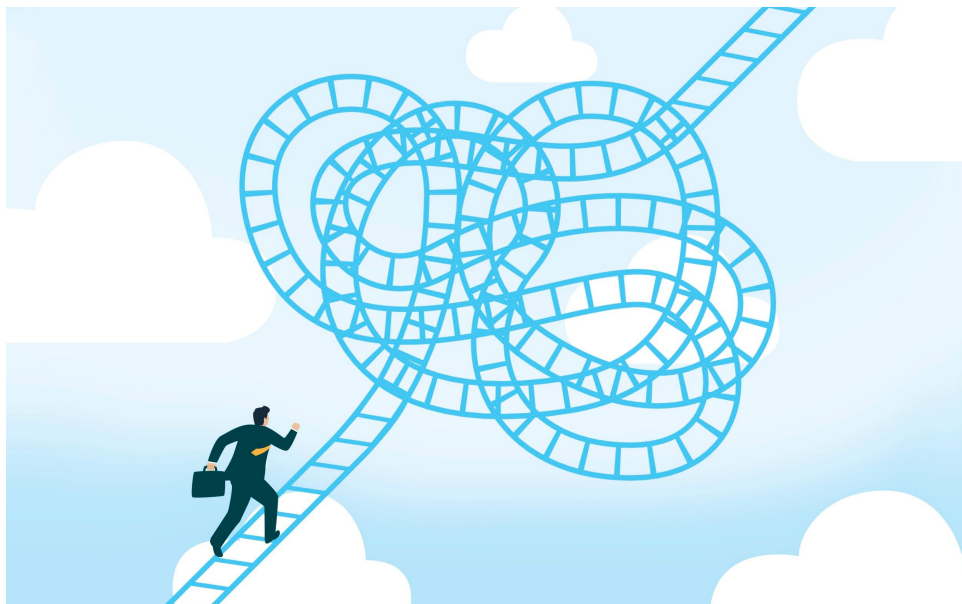
Stapleton says: "The main [pattern] is they finish university and feel real pressure to get their first job, so they usually take what comes along thinking it might be temporary for a couple of years and that then they'll figure out what they want to do. Five to seven years later, they're still doing it, and thinking, 'How have I even got down this path?' They feel trapped and don't know what else they could do."

Of course, the reality in today's pandemic world is the options will be even more restricted. But the idea of rethinking your *métier* may soon be a necessity to many. Somerville, in any case, had already acknowledged that pursuing her passion had to be balanced with making ends meet, in recession times or otherwise.

"I think a lot of people are reassessing where they are, how work fits in and what will make them happy long-term," she says. "But the reality is that I have to make money."

Her latest podcast is called *How To Be a Boss at Ageing*, and one of its core themes is work and how to pivot. It's a subject that seems more pertinent than ever.

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Anniki Sommerville with daughter Greta
Geoff Pugh/The Telegraph

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