Considering a Career Change? Here’s the Truth About the Messy Middle.

It’s often worth it, but it’s less glamorous than people make it out to be.

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A career change is often made out to be like a glamorous makeover — a blasé “before” picture transformed to a beautiful “after” in a glossy magazine. But just as we never see the work that goes into a magazine makeover (the gym sweats, the shapewear, the layers of make-up, the $500 haircut), we rarely hear about the hustle and sweat that goes into a career change.

So let’s peel back all of the perfect projections and shiny Instagram filters and take an honest look at the messy middle of a career change, that unglamorous journey from start to success.

There’s a ton of trial and error. Emphasis on the error.

Making a career change is largely an exercise in resilience. When I quit my job as a professor to build a career-coaching company, I created several initial offerings, many which I scrapped or tweaked significantly. In retrospect, I understand this doesn’t necessarily mean I was doing it wrong; I just

hadn’t figured out what worked for me yet.

The first brand I built for my business didn’t fit. It was like a blazer that was two sizes too small. It was too traditional and too corporate (I am neither of those things), and it felt like a straightjacket. As a result, I attracted clients I didn’t like working with. Getting it wrong on the first (or second or third) try is pretty much par for the course, whether you’re building a business or making a career change to a new industry. The key is to keep tweaking and keep trying until you get it right.

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There are trade-offs, concessions and compromises.

One of my clients loved her big, badass truck, but she didn’t love it as much as she loved the idea of actually enjoying her work, so when she left her career as an engineer to become a freelance writer, it was something she was willing to give up.

Many career changes require some kind of lifestyle trade-off in the beginning. If not a less fancy car, then perhaps a tighter belt on your dining-out budget or fewer vacations. If it’s not a financial compromise, it may be a concession of time. If you’re a side hustler, you’ll likely be trading in some of the free time you used to have on evenings and weekends while you do your build. There may be fewer brunches and weekend getaways for a while, but it’s temporary, and if you’re moving from a career you hate to one you love it’s a small price to pay.

You may also trade in “ideal” for “less than perfect, but workable” at the beginning of your career change, whether it’s a stepping stone job to break into a new industry or a budget-

bolstering business decision. I worked out of a shared workspace for the first couple of years of my business. Was it ideal? No, but it helped me to keep my expenses lean so I could grow.

You'll need scaffolding and safety nets.

Unless you're independently wealthy, you'll likely have to rely on financial scaffolding and safety nets while you build what's next. Financial scaffolding is exactly what it sounds like: some kind of external support while you work on your build. This typically comes in the form of another source of income. I kept my teaching gig for four months before taking my business full-time. A client of mine is working a part-time job while she makes her move. Another is taking on some extra consulting work. You won't likely be swimming in cash right out of the gate. Might as well make a little extra income to take the pressure off.

Even when you decide to jump into your next work venture full-time, it may be a while before it can support you the way you want it to. It's not uncommon to rely on a financial safety net for a few months, be it a greater contribution from a spouse for living expenses or the need to dip into your savings. This is something I did when I started my business, and several of my career-change clients have as well. This is fine so long as you know your threshold and have a plan to pay yourself back once things are up and running.

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It's more of a crawl than a sprint.

It's hard not to feel like a toddler when making a career change. Like a 3-year-old in the backseat whining, "Are we

therrrrrre yet?” your impatience will grate you because everything takes so damn long. Tasks you could do in a flash a year from now will take you several hours or days. It’s because of the learning curve, and (I’m sorry to say) it’s pretty much unavoidable. Luckily, it’s temporary.

If you’re burned out from your previous job, hitting your stride in your career change may take even longer. I have several clients who took a career “time out” for a few months before moving on to something new. One was so mentally exhausted after giving up her job as a realtor that she didn’t have the bandwidth to think creatively about her next move right away. Another was so physically and emotionally burned out from her job coordinating New York fashion week that she had to wait for her body to recover first.

If this is you, don’t be too hard on yourself. A brief career time out is rarely anybody’s first choice, but trust me, as a career coach working behind the scenes, I can tell you it’s more common than you might think. It’s just rarely something people talk about in their career change highlight reel.

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