All the Right Career Moves

Points to consider when starting or changing your career path

Over the course of his 30-year career, Steven Moore, PhD, has made a number of moves, among them working clinically with people with physical disabilities, doing full-time management consulting, supervising adult services for a large community mental health center, and serving as chief operating officer for a company that provided administrative services for state-run Medicaid and other behavioral health services in Connecticut.

“One of the things I’ve always been intrigued by is how to apply my knowledge and training in new environments with new clients and new situations,” says Moore, now vice president for business development at The Village, a Hartford, Connecticut-based behavioral health organization for children and families.

Taking a different track has been Wendy Lippe, PhD, who’s been running a successful private practice in the Boston area for nearly 20 years.

“I am passionate about the work of listening, connecting and ‘being’ with patients, and I also have a strong drive for the creative and administrative control required for building and sustaining a business,” Lippe says.

Moore and Lippe represent just two of the ways you can craft your career, and there are many more. To choose your path – whether you are just starting your career or are thinking of switching gears – factors to consider include the type of work you want to do, the populations you’d like to serve and the settings and work pace that are most comfortable for you. Last but not least, think about your financial needs and desires – whether a steady paycheck is preferable for a while, or whether you want to chart your own course.

Ultimately, your own answers to these questions will determine your course of action, and life is likely to intervene as well. To make decisions that are right for you, here’s some advice from veterans.

Choose areas that excite you.

When Monica Kurylo, PhD, ABPP-Rp, did a practicum in neurological rehabilitation at the University of Kansas Medical School, she knew she had found her niche.

“I distinctly remember saying to myself, ‘Boy, it would be really cool to have this job,’” Kurylo says. She loved working on an integrated care team, helping people recover from stroke and other serious brain injuries and having a varied schedule. Today, as director of neurorehabilitation psychology at the same medical center, she still loves those things – not to mention training practicum students and interns to go on and do similar work.

For Iva Greywolf, PhD, helping indigenous people gain strength and hope has fueled a decades-long career doing clinical, consulting, supervisory and administrative work with and for Native American clients in remote areas of the country.

Coming from a reservation environment herself, “I know there’s a lot of violence, a lot of poverty, a lot of environmental stressors,” she says. “I want [Native people] to see that they can choose a different path, no matter what their circumstances have been up until that point.”

Honor your proclivities.

When structuring your work life, factor in your own personality and pace, others suggest.

Lippe’s strengths include strong executive functioning – the ability to create, organize and stay on top of systems, for example – as well as the ability to tolerate a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity.

 “[Those traits] allow me to connect with and be with patients in a very natural way, and also to be organized and structured in ways that a large private practice requires,” says Lippe, who maintains thriving offices in Harvard Square and Brookline, Mass.
When Dawn Huber, PhD, switched from private practice to a clinical faculty position in pediatric neuropsychology at the University of Missouri, she knew it was a good fit for her extroverted personality.

“In private practice, I had to be really conscious of making sure I was getting time with professional colleagues and taking care of myself in those ways,” she says. “Now, I have the opportunity to interact with people on a regular basis,” including medical colleagues, patients and patients’ families. “I think this setting fits my needs a little better that way.”

Don’t be afraid to take risks.
The outreaches of Alaska aren’t everyone’s idea of an ideal practice spot, but for Greywolf, it felt just right.

A 20-year stint serving the indigenous community in that state began soon after she visited former classmates who were working on Baranof Island, an island in an archipelago off the western coast of Alaska.

“We went up an old logging road and [saw] a full moon cresting up over the mountains,” Greywolf recalls. “When you looked down from this high vantage point, you saw the scatter of islands and the ocean around them. On this magical night, they said, ‘Would you ever consider working in Alaska?’” The answer was yes, and she never regretted it, she says.

As eager as you may be to choose or change paths, think hard about what you’re getting into.

“Don’t move away from something you don’t like – only toward something you want.”

– Steven Moore, PhD

Don’t jump until you’re ready.
As eager as you may be to choose or change paths, think hard about what you’re getting into, Moore adds.

“I know this is a cliché,” he says, “but don’t move away from something you don’t like – only toward something you want.” In the process, consider the reality of your finances and what you will likely be stepping into, as the grass tends to look greener on the other side, he says.

But do jump.
At the same time, don’t panic if you need to make choices – sometimes quick ones – based on personal and practical factors such as ailing parents or a spouse’s career needs.

“I’ve never had a plan that worked exactly the way I thought it would,” says Huber.

A couple of things to keep in mind: For one, as a trained psychologist, you have many skills that can be used in a variety of ways. For another, it’s important to be flexible with yourself, understanding that the situation you’re in is unique, and that you’re the best judge of your circumstances.

“The more I get into my career and talk with interesting, successful people, the more I see that most of us have had really different pathways to where we have landed,” she says. Draw on your clinical skills, she adds: “Use the same tools with yourself that you’d use with your patients who are making major decisions and coping with anxieties about life changes.”

Factor in finances.

Apply the same messages about your own personality style, preference and life situation to your finances, others add. Do you have a set income you’d like to make? Would you rather earn your income from a steady paycheck supplied by someone else, or be your own manager? Consider your level of comfort with financial uncertainty, ambiguity and risk, which will likely vary depending on the stage of your career and your life circumstances, they say.

Lippe felt comfortable starting a private practice right out of grad school because she knew she had a well-established network already in place, the result of attending graduate school and doing her internship and post-docs in Boston. Meanwhile, Moore opted for a pay cut when he decided to return to clinical work after several years of management consulting. “I thought my level of satisfaction and ultimate long-term financial gain would be better if I took a step back,” he says.

He also takes issue with the notion that you should never agree to a position that makes less than you’re making now.

“You have to walk a line between the immediate cost of making this decision and the long-term benefits,” he says.

The bottom line? Forging a successful career path is at least as much about choosing what keeps you excited and enthused as about the money you make—but with some intelligent strategizing, you can meet both goals at once.

Written by Tori DeAngelis