

# **So, you want a portable career?**

**FREE INSPIRATION**

**FROM**

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**SUMMERTIME PUBLISHING SERVICES**

## **A Career in Your Suitcase**

Jo Parfitt shares her secrets, explaining how you too can create the perfect portable career.

The majority of today's families comprise two partners who both want to pursue a long term career. Today's managers accept that if they really want to ascend the career ladder then they need to be prepared to relocate frequently.

As we all become more educated it follows that an educated, successful man will have an educated, successful wife. Educated, ambitious people want to work, frequently in a dual career scenario. Yet it is rare that both partners will receive promotion or opportunities together, and after a while, one partner is offered a job he or she cannot refuse. Immediately the balance shifts. One partner begins to make the career choices, while the other takes a back seat.

Losing the esteem that goes with a once held professional identity can be a setback to some and a disaster to others. Despite an increasingly global and mobile society the problem of the career of the accompanying partner still poses a problem.

It is estimated that 75 percent of international managers are involved in a dual career partnership. Yet the surveys show that rarely more than 25 per cent of spouses find fulfilling employment. The number one reason for foreign assignment failure remains spousal and familial discontent and the main reason that the spouse is unhappy is because he, or she, finds it impossible to retain a professional identity in a satisfactory manner.

There is no doubt that 'on-the-economy', traditional, salaried careers are the hardest to track down and retain. Increasingly, companies are realising that self-employment and portable careers offer a flexible and viable solution. Throughout my own decade abroad I learned that if I created my own work I could choose my projects as well as when and how I worked. I call this creation of a tailor-made portable career 'a career in your suitcase'. If you think this option might work for you, then you will need to be a super-motivated self-starter. But for me, there was no question. If I wanted to be sane, I had to work.

If, like me, you try to maintain a career, a happy family and still leave enough time for visitors and travel, then you need to pack all the tools you need for the task ahead into that metaphorical suitcase.

*Launching Your Career in the UK* is published by Focus Information Services in London.

'When it comes to finding work, we know that as an expatriate, you have different concerns, issues and challenges . . . As an accompanying partner, you must balance multiple commitments with professional work. As someone who's been relocated, you face choices you may not have contemplated prior to moving. And if you're planning to move again, your career goals differ from those of a stay-in-one-place expatriate,' writes Liz Felter, the Director of Focus.

To this, add the complexity of job hunting as a foreign national, concerns about doing, saying or wearing the right thing, loneliness and steep, often painful learning curves and you find yourself with a challenge.

To this challenge do not ignore that the balance between husband and wife, or partners, shifts when one partner's employer begins to dictate where his or her family must move next. When that move involves going abroad, the balance shifts still more, as the accompanying partner becomes necessarily involved in the practical and family nurturing aspects.

So, if we accept that 'real' dual careers are rare, and that when one partner leads the other follows, then it becomes clear that the accompanying partner has to adjust his or her mindset, goals, beliefs and values in order to find career fulfilment.

Today, around ten per cent of accompanying partners is male. And this makes a difference. For while a female has had centuries of conditioning to accept a lesser, nurturing role, a male has a lot of catching up to do.

### **My portable career**

I lived abroad for ten years and have been back home for five more. During this time I have been determined to maintain my professional identity, which for me, means earning my own money. I have never wanted to ask my husband for the money to buy him a birthday present. We have lived in Dubai, Muscat, Stavanger and England, moved house ten times and produced two children. My husband is almost always away on business. So, while I wanted desperately to work, I had other commitments too. Over time I developed a range of portable careers that I adapted or added to as the opportunity arose. Although I rarely earned more than luxury money, there was a period of a year or so before we had children when I did earn more than him. In addition, it is worth noting that my long term career prospects did not suffer by my unorthodox work style. In 2001 my income matched his again.

When I left England in 1987 I had been running a computer training company and writing word processing handbooks. By the time I returned a decade later I was a journalist, a publisher, had sold books through a party plan scheme, made and sold date chutney, taught French conversation, creative writing and word processing, run a curriculum vitae service, developed training schools and taken in

typing. After ten years and several enforced professional reinventions I knew everything there was to know about maintaining a career on the move. Before I left expatriate life, I was well on the way to completing a book called *A Career in Your Suitcase*, and had developed a workshop of the same name.

We repatriated in 1997. I was optimistic about my future. I had done it all before. I was wrong. One of the toughest things about going home was realising that I was just as anonymous back in my home town as I had been at the start of each foreign location. And we were no longer on expatriate status. Worst of all, this time we needed the money.

I had been forced to start again so many times, to find new clients and discover which business ideas worked where, that I had become a portable career expert. I discovered that the skills I needed to create myself a career that would fit round my other commitments were the same whether I was abroad or not.

### **First, find your passion**

Moving from country to county you can reinvent yourself in each new place. You can recycle your skills, learn new ones or adapt an old career to suit the new location. If you know what you love to do from the beginning you have a much better chance of success.

I believe strongly that it is only when you live and work by what you believe in that you can be truly enthusiastic about what you do. And if you are enthusiastic, that enthusiasm will be infectious. Other people start to believe in you too, and that, in turn, becomes success.

Finding out what you truly love to do is difficult. But as an accompanying partner you have the opportunity to pause and reflect. Your employed partner is unlikely to have the same privilege. Think about what you loved to do when you were a child. What did you want to be when you grew up? If knew you were guaranteed success and could do anything, what would it be? What do you do that fills you with energy, makes time fly and sees you bounce out of bed in the morning?

Take a look at Nancy Anderson's book *Work with Passion* or Barbara Sher's *I Could Do Anything if Only I Knew What it Was*. Both books are full of ideas, inspiration and simple exercises that will lead you to your authentic self.

**Here are 15 ways to find your passion:**

### **1. Getting started**

It is not surprising that many people neglect the difficult task of self-scrutiny. After all, where do you begin? How do you get started? How do you know you're on the right track? And how do you keep yourself accountable for the results? Here are several suggestions to launch you on your own voyage of self-discovery.

### **2. Buy a notebook**

Prepare to do a lot of soul searching, thinking and writing. Buy yourself a large, lined notebook, preferably spiral bound, in which to write your thoughts and exercises. Choose a large one, about A4 or foolscap in size. Try not to succumb to doing this on a computer. If you want to be creative, it's more productive to have a pen in your hand than a keyboard beneath your fingers. Computers use the left, logical, side of your brain. A notebook and pen will use the creative, right side.

### **3. Make a space**

Give yourself permission to make a space in which to explore. This may mean you will have to give up something else in your life to provide time for your voyage of discovery. Ideas will only come to you if you have the space in your head in which to think and the space in your life in which to take action.

Practitioners of *feng shui* recognise the value of clearing clutter from their lives. Space clearing, clutter clearing and life laundry can help you to make the mental space in which to explore your dreams. Try to tidy your workspace at the end of each day, so that each morning you're faced with a clear desk. Put your files and papers behind closed doors and remove mirrors from areas where they reflect clutter.

So, create yourself a mental and physical space to give a positive start to your journey.

#### **4. Make a team**

Self-assessment is very effective when you're able to talk with others who can provide perspective, balance and insight. Solitary self-assessments may invite self-delusion and frustration and the 'finding out what you want to find out' syndrome. We all need help in order to see ourselves accurately. Self-assessment is an interactive process. When someone else is there to probe and challenge it stokes our imaginations and self-reflection.

Recruit supporters who can be on your success team. Find people who will give you permission to find out who you are, and who believe in you. You need to be encouraged and praised. If your closest family members are not with you in this, then prepare for a rough but I hope not unbearable ride. Best of all, find some friends you know well, who can join you on the journey too, and meet or send emails each to other regularly to keep each other motivated and on track.

If you can't build your own team of supporters, you should seriously consider hiring a coach or careers counsellor. I know from painful experience that I won't go to the gym if I'm alone. It's too easy to let myself off. Involving someone else makes it much easier to make a commitment.

#### **5. Have a blue sky party**

You could always kick off with a Blue Sky Party. I use 'blue sky' to refer to those magical times when we discuss dreams and make plans with someone else. It's a time for brainstorming - or 'random-entry listings' as it is now politically correct to call them. It is a time for ideas. But I also take 'blue sky' to refer to the blue sky that can emerge from the clouds, and the hope that it brings. A summer's day, with a blue sky above, is something many of us, particularly the Northern Europeans, long for. Divide the time you have available by the number of guests you invite and take turns to blue sky with each other.

## **6. Make a commitment**

Promise yourself that you'll do all this. But also tell someone else what you're doing. Make a commitment to someone else - a friend, counsellor or coach - whom you can trust to check up on your progress regularly and with love. Also, make a commitment to yourself that you'll be honest and that you will listen to your inner voice. Often the first thought that pops into your head will be the most authentic. Trust your instincts. We don't mean to lie to ourselves deliberately, but through our efforts to capture what is true we can be influenced by what we would like things to be - as well as by what we think we should be. Try hard to be honest about what you are and how you feel.

## **7. Monitor your progress**

Start that notebook now. Write down your thoughts and your achievements each day under the appropriate date. This will help you keep track of your progress and make it more concrete. All you achieve and the thoughts that come to you each day. Date each entry. When you write things down it will make your progress more real and encouraging.

## **8. Passions and values**

In order to assess ourselves we need a structure. We can build this structure around the standards by which we are evaluated when we apply for a job position. You could divide the elements that make up your career-based skills into *passions* and *values*. Write each of these words at the top of separate pages of your notebook and, as you have ideas about your passions and values, jot them down on the relevant page.

## **9. Your label is showing**

We all have an idea of how we appear to others and how this may differ from how we see ourselves. It can be very revealing when we also take a look at how we view others. If we consider a trait in someone else to be negative, then we are likely to disapprove of it in ourselves, and so on.

## **10. Time flies**

Write 'Time Flies' at the top of a piece of paper and write down the things you have ever done when you realised afterwards that time had flown by. While you are gardening or shopping perhaps?

In conversation, cooking, typing or driving? Think about it. When time flies so fast that you lose track of it, you must be having fun.

## **11. Energy sources**

It is widely accepted that we expend far less energy doing the things we love than the things we don't. Some people claim that we use an astounding 100 per cent less.

Title a blank page with the words 'energy sources' and write down the things you do that energise you. What makes you feel like you're flying? What makes you want to sing? What makes you happy and puts

a spring in your step? Now work with the next list, 'energy vampires', to find out some of your possible energy drainers.

## **12. Energy vampires**

On this page write down the things you do that make you feel tired. What activities bore you, and rob you of motivation and momentum? Also list the types of people who seem to drain you of energy. Think of them as energy vampires, these tasks and these people that suck life out of you. If types of people don't come to mind, list actual people. Consider whether they are demanding or impatient people, perfectionists or people who can barely get one foot in front of the other. If you can calculate when you feel drained it can help you to see when you're energised. If you feel drained by people who are bossy, then think about working in an environment that allows you to be the boss. If you find it hard to be among needy or weak people, then think about working in a high energy, successful environment. If you feel uncomfortable among charismatic, dynamic people, then perhaps you would feel happier in a nurturing, supportive field.

### **13. Fear of success**

Contrary to popular belief it is not always a fear of failure that stops us from doing something - it is just as likely to be a fear of success. When I was a five year old, I had to change schools because my family moved house. I have a vivid memory of that first day at my new school when the teacher asked me to stand up and recite the alphabet. I did so, using the adult pronunciation of 'ay, bee, see'. The teacher told me I was wrong and that it should be pronounced phonetically 'ah, buh, kuh', which is the standard teaching method in England. I felt uncomfortable. Children stared at me. The teacher said I was 'too clever' so I was moved up a class, away from my peers. I saw this as a punishment. When I look closely at my life I can see many instances later on where I 'dumbed down' in order to fit in. According to Dr David George, the eminent education expert, England is one of very few countries where it is not cool to be clever. For the remainder of my school life I forced myself to be average, and my grades reflected this. Only since my fortieth birthday have I realised that deep down I may actually be academic.

Consider the times in your life when you may have sabotaged your success. I sabotaged mine by dumbing down. Think about your motives. Think about the passions you may have suppressed as a result. Write them down.

### **14. When success was easily won**

In her book *I Could Do Anything I Wanted if Only I Knew What it Was*, Barbara Sher provides many great exercises. Some of the most revealing have to do with success. Sher too believes that we are blocked more by our fear of success than by our fear of failure.

There will have been times in your past when you did allow yourself to succeed at something. Times when you did not give in to peer pressure or fears. Write a list of these achievements. Remember also to include those which are not work related.

## **15. Do you want to be alone?**

Most people tend to think of themselves as either an introvert or an extrovert. In fact, very few people are all one or all the other - most of us are a mixture of both. When I analysed my typical working day I realised that I work best alone, not just by myself in an office, but in a whole building. Yet I do need daily social input in order to redress the balance a bit. Working alone as I do, I still need time to brainstorm with others, preferably face to face. So I founded and am now simply on the committee of a women's business network called Winning Connections for Women and try to diary a few lunch or coffee meetings each month. Most importantly, I need to get away, and have time at conferences and on speaking engagements to recharge my batteries with concentrated interaction and learning.

Think about your ideal working environment. Do you want to be alone, with people, or a mix of the two? Would you like to work with people, but spend your leisure time alone? What's worked for you in the past? What hasn't? Write a description of your ideal work/ life balance.

## **Look inside yourself**

Before you can begin to decide what you are going to do next you need to think about all the things you can do. What are your skills? Is there a need for them in this location? Which new skills have you picked up from your last posting?

One of the first mistakes people make when they are attempting to inventory their transferable skills, is to only consider the things they have done in a work context. The skills you have will extend beyond the world of work. Think about your hobbies. Think about the things you have learned by being an expatriate, about language, transition, communication, organisation or teamwork, for example.

Sometimes you cannot see your strengths yourself, so ask your friends, take a personality test, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and think about all the qualities you have displayed through your interests, social life, clubs or volunteer work.

## **Look outside yourself**

As I found, it is no good planning to work with dates, when you are in a country that is usually too cold for palm trees. You have to be flexible and adaptable. If you can't make date chutney, then perhaps you could make it with another fruit? If you can't write for the local market, maybe you can write for another? Sometimes you will have to give up on some ideas because they are either impractical or because the market is already saturated.

Do your research. Talk to people and find out what kind of work is available and ask if they know of any gaps in the market. Think laterally and see if you can adapt some of your previous career ideas, and whether you might need to learn a new skill first.

Join networks and clubs and listen to what people complain about. If they are moaning at the lack of babysitters, start a babysitting circle. If they wish they could get hold of maternity clothes, consider importing some. Similarly, keep on the look out for leads. If lots of people are buying homes in France, then think about starting a French club for children or finding out about French mortgages so you can offer advice.

## **Careers to go**

A portable career is one that moves when you do and will fit into your metaphorical suitcase. It is a career that can be picked up and put down again as necessary. It can be tailored to fit your lifestyle and skills, but it needs to weigh nothing and contain items that could be used consecutively or concurrently. Find your passion, inventory your skills and pack them in your case today.

## Six Steps to Success

No matter how good your idea, nor how much it fits your skills, your passions and the marketplace, no portable career will get off the ground unless you think about the following:

**Networking** is the most important thing you can do. Try to think of it as relationship building rather than a formal setting where people swap business cards. If you can't find a group that suits your interests, then start your own. When we came home I started a women's business group called Women Connecting Women. Stay in touch with your past contacts too, they may know people you need to know.

**Market yourself** by seeing if you can talk for a few minutes about what you are doing to local networks and clubs. Get yourself a simple brochure or business card, so that you have something to hand out. See if you can write about what you are doing for local newsletters or websites and get yourself from free publicity.

**Create a team** if you do not want to work alone. Focus on your talents, team up with other people who have complementary skills and form a business between you.

**Think positive** by attending personal development seminars locally, through teleclass or reading books such as *Transform Yourself* by Ros Taylor. Surround yourself with other optimistic, proactive people and it will buoy you up.

**Manage your time** by only setting attainable goals for yourself. Keep charts of daily, weekly, monthly or long term targets and relish the times when you can cross things off.

**Ask for advice** and help from experts, other professionals, or free information services. Consider hiring a careers coach or a careers advisor. Find yourself a mentor.

## Resources

Personal development and coaching teleclasses are available from [www.teleclass.com](http://www.teleclass.com) and let you to attend a conference by telephone.

You can do Myers-Briggs test at [www.knowyourtype.com](http://www.knowyourtype.com)

*Work with Passion* by Nancy Anderson is published by New World Library.

*I Could Do Anything If Only I Knew What it Was* by Barbara Sher is published by Dell Trade Paperbacks.

*Transform Yourself* by Ros Taylor is published by Kogan Page

*Thriving in Mind* by Katherine Benziger is available from [www.benziger.org](http://www.benziger.org).

Focus Information Services [www.focus-info.org](http://www.focus-info.org)

Winning Connections for Women is on [www.wcw.eu.com](http://www.wcw.eu.com)

## Useful magazines

Real Business  
[www.realbusiness.com](http://www.realbusiness.com)

eQLibrium  
[www.eqilibrium.co.uk](http://www.eqilibrium.co.uk)

Female Entrepreneur  
[www.female-entrepreneur.com](http://www.female-entrepreneur.com)

Business Woman Canada  
[www.businesswomancanada.com](http://www.businesswomancanada.com)

## Websites

Magenta Circle

[www.magentacircle.co.uk](http://www.magentacircle.co.uk)

Career Intelligence

[www.career-intelligence.com](http://www.career-intelligence.com)

Jobs and Moms

[www.jobsandmoms.com](http://www.jobsandmoms.com)

Fab Jobs

[www.fabjob.com](http://www.fabjob.com)

Career in Your Suitcase

[www.career-in-your-suitcase.com](http://www.career-in-your-suitcase.com)

This free ebook comes to you from Jo Parfitt. Publishing consultant, author, journalist, writer, teacher and portable career specialist.

Her book **Career in Your Suitcase 2** was published in 2002 and can be purchased by sending an email to [shop@career-in-your-suitcase.com](mailto:shop@career-in-your-suitcase.com), though [www.vinehouse.co.uk](http://www.vinehouse.co.uk) and [www.yourmarketingmatters.co.uk](http://www.yourmarketingmatters.co.uk).

Her writing courses **Release the Book Within** and **Definite Articles** are run all over the world and by correspondence. For more information please go to <http://www.career-in-your-suitcase.com/summertime.htm>

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