

## CAREER JOURNAL

# Tap Existing Skills, Old Ties When Changing Your Career

*Past Job May Offer  
Valuable Resources  
For Easier Transition*

BY AMY PALANJIAN

**A**fter working 16-hour days for seven years as an investment banker, Rachel Thebault decided to follow her dream: a career in baking. All it took for her to make the leap from banker to baker was a batch of chocolate truffles.

Ms. Thebault had been baking as a hobby since she was a child. But the demands of her full-time job gave her little time to bake for fun—let alone for a living. That all changed after she cooked up some chocolate truffles for a New Year's Eve party. Almost immediately, friends began putting in orders of truffles and cakes for their parties and weddings.

In 2004, Ms. Thebault decided to leave her job at Bank of America Corp. for culinary school, and now, with the help of her financial background, she has her own bakery. "It was a huge step for me to give up such a lucrative career that I was successful in to go back to school in a new field," says the 32-year-old Ms. Thebault.

Leaving a steady job in hopes of making a career out of a personal passion has its challenges. But leveraging what—and who—you already know can make the transition easier. Ms. Thebault regularly taps her investment-banking skills as she works to build her own baking business. "Being able to understand income statements, balance sheets and how the financial structure of a business works has been very helpful," she says.

After graduating from culinary school, she rented space in a commercial kitchen to make special-order cakes, cupcakes, truffles and cookies as a way to ease into commercial baking. As an investment banker, Ms. Thebault spent years working with retail and restaurant clients and had a strong idea about what made the successful ones tick—and what doomed the lackluster ones. When she decided to move into a storefront shop, Ms. Thebault says her finance background gave her the know-

how to set up a business plan and determine her target market. Her previous career also gave her a valuable resource: contacts and colleagues from her banking and college days she could call for tips on marketing and strategy, and legal advice. Using that bridge from her old career, Ms. Thebault opened a bakery, Tribeca Treats, in New York City a year ago.

Ms. Thebault isn't alone in taking that big step to switch careers. A study by outplacement consulting firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc. found that nearly 40% of all job seekers in 2007 weren't just looking for a new employer, they also were hoping to switch to a new industry. And a survey of job hunters conducted last year by Salary.com revealed that nearly 60% of respondents wanted to change careers.

While Ms. Thebault's path might seem long—about three years—it is quite typical. A career reinvention takes an average of three to five years to complete, says Pamela Mitchell, founder and chief executive of the ReInvention Institute, a coaching and consulting firm in Miami. Ms. Mitchell advises clients to stay in their current careers—and continue to draw a salary—for as long as possible while they develop a clear plan for their next profession.

In some cases, you might be able to use that time to look for experiences in your current job that you can take with you. One client Ms. Mitchell worked with wanted to become a full-time writer after a 10-year career in the non-

profit world. "When she looked around at her current job, she realized that she could work on internal projects that would connect her to contacts she would need to know in the future," says Ms. Mitchell.

Finding part-time or volunteer work in your dream career can be a low-risk introduction to a new industry—and will help build experience. Nina Storm, 33, always had a passion for causes and wanted to join the nonprofit world. She was working as a casting coordinator for Universal Pictures when she heard about and became interested in Global Green USA, an environmental nonprofit. She joined the group's new Los Angeles committee as a way to learn more about the organization. "As a volunteer, I formed relationships with the staff and I became more confident in skills which—at that point—weren't represented on my résumé," Ms. Storm says.

After volunteering for a year, including working as a planner for the group's Pre-Oscar Party, she interviewed to be the group's event coordinator. She landed the job and now, a year and a half later, Ms. Storm is Global Green's events manager, producing six or more large

events around the country each year.

Dipping your toes into a new career while still collecting a corporate paycheck also can open your eyes to a reality Ms. Thebault warns of: "When you turn your passion into your career, it becomes a job." That may mean dealing with budgets, marketing, hiring and firing—the less-scintillating aspects of the work that you probably never faced when, say, baking for friends and family.

To avoid a rude awakening, it is wise to look before leaping, experts say. Talk to someone who does your dream job to help determine whether you can be satisfied by being part of the process—working to keep your bakery running rather than doing all of the baking yourself. Ask them about the downsides. "Otherwise, doing the thing you once loved will be the worst job you've ever had," says Ms. Mitchell.

That isn't the case for Elizabeth Vianna, 41, who turned a recreational interest in wine into a career she loves. She decided to leave her job as a clinical toxicologist at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center after a particularly good glass of French wine Sociando-Mallet. Ms. Vianna had been going to tastings for years when an idea hit her: She could put her background in science to use in making wine. She abandoned her plan to attend medical school, moved to wine country and enrolled in the graduate program in enology at the University of California, Davis, a decade ago. Ms. Vianna worked through two internships and held two assistant winemaking positions before landing her current job as winemaker at Chimney Rock in the Napa Valley in 2005.

"Work doesn't feel so much like work anymore," says Ms. Vianna, who primarily makes Bordeaux varieties for Chimney Rock. "Like any job, there are times when it's stressful, but at the end of the day, I'm amazed at what an enchanting way of making a living I have found."

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