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SHOULD I JUMP?

After years at home with her girls, Catherine Sylvester knew she needed a new career, but was she brave enough to plunge into the unknown? Turns out, it's been an overwhelmingly positive experience and she has encouraging advice for others wondering about a new direction.

Recently I found myself embarking on a new and somewhat daunting venture that gave rise to an unsettling mix of emotions. A little fear, a smidge of anxiety, a dash of excitement.

The source of my slightly agitated state was the seemingly innocuous rite of passage known as work experience. Surely an everyday, don't-overthink-it type of activity? To be stepping into this, however, as I inched closer to 50 years old than to 30, firmly displaced me from my comfort zone, sending me into the realm of unfamiliar, uncharted territory.

I'm not new to the workforce in general, just new to the one I found myself in that day. I've come to discover I'm not alone. There are many wāhine just like me who, for varying reasons, are switching paths, changing lanes and launching phase two (or more) of their careers.

Our reasons may differ, but common threads run through these life-changing decisions. Often we've experienced significant events, such as redundancies, children growing up and giving us more freedom to invest in ourselves, or the epiphany that at this age and stage, there's no better time to start doing what really brings us joy and fulfilment.

Knowing ourselves more deeply than in our twenties, when many of us chose our original career paths, is often a factor. What appealed 20 or 30 years ago may no longer be a comfortable fit.

My revelation came slowly. I'd attended drama school in Australia in my early twenties, but my long-held dream of being an actress hadn't extended

much beyond that – save for a few TV commercials and a moment on *Shortland Street*. Accepting that an Oscar was not on the cards for me, I did a Ross from *Friends* and chose to pivot to TV presenting. Gratefully, the doors opened easily, and with some radio work added in, I was creatively fulfilled.

Throughout the run of the final TV show I presented, I experienced multiple miscarriages. Pressing pause on my career once my girls were born allowed me space to breathe and enjoy time with them, after the long season of grief and uncertainty.

What I hadn't factored on was just how difficult it would be to “un-pause” and get my foot, toe or fingertip back in the door once they were older, having been out of the rhythm of the industry for some time. It's not lost on me what a privilege it was to be able to stay home with my children. As they grew, however, I sensed that vital parts of me were atrophying – the creative and intellectual parts that make me, me. Resuming work in TV or radio seemed the obvious choice, but no matter which door I knocked on, they all seemed to be firmly shut.

Eventually I undertook work as a tutor at a radio school in Tauranga. Imparting information and knowledge to some of the incredible future broadcasters who passed through the school's doors was satisfying, but I knew it wasn't my forever job.

Towards the end of last year, I felt stirrings of change on the horizon. The grumbling mumble in my heart was increasing in volume. Yet I was like the kid standing on the edge of the pool, desperate to jump in, but unsure of how deep or cold the water is



When Catherine Sylvester wanted to head back to work, “un-pausing” her career was more difficult than she expected, so retraining seemed an obvious option.

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and questioning whether it’s safer to stay dry and warm in the known than to risk belly-flopping foolishly, painfully in front of everyone.

As a parent I know there are times my children need a gentle push. Belly-flop or not, the chances of loving the water and learning to swim are infinitely higher and more exciting than stagnating in a puddle of dripping water poolside. The philosopher Plato once said: “Our need will be the creator.” And so it was. When the doors shut permanently on the radio school this year, I no longer had that safety net to fall back on. The push had been provided. It was time to launch. With many years ahead to engage in challenging, meaningful work,

I realised I’d benefit from upskilling and retraining.

Turns out I haven’t just jumped into the metaphorical pool – I’ve climbed the high dive board and taken a running leap. Within weeks I started two tertiary courses – a Postgraduate Diploma in Journalism and, spurred on by a desire to connect to my whakapapa, a NZ Certificate in Te Reo (Level Two). I also started a part-time role that requires a weekly commute from Pāpāmoa to Tāmaki Makaurau. And of course, there was the aforementioned work experience in a newsroom full of seasoned – and encouraging – professionals.

A natural fit

The move to journalism makes so much sense to me now. I’m an eternal question-asker – the tourist on a Louisiana swamp tour who took the guide literally when he declared, “Ask as many questions as you like,” to the point where he soon avoided eye contact with me. My career has always involved storytelling in some form. Now I want to tell other people’s stories – to create and share content widely, dig that little bit deeper and go that little bit further.

Decision made, my initial excitement morphed into concern. Would there be a place for a woman my age to make a start in a new industry such as journalism? How would I juggle study, mothering, home responsibilities, commuting? Would my perimenopausal brain come to the party and cope with everything new I’d need to absorb? More importantly, would it retain that information? Feeling nervous that I’d encounter ageism and eye rolls, I second-guessed my decision many times.

Life experience counts

Career coach Lucy Sanderson-Gammon, of Luminous Consulting, specialises in helping mid-career professionals who have fallen out of love with their jobs gain the clarity, courage and confidence to create great work lives. To allay the sort of common fears I felt, she says: “People who’ve had to juggle a host of conflicting demands, between raising children and working, have learned to be excellent time managers. They bring these abilities to the workplace. They get the most out of whatever time is available.” And don’t worry about being the oldest person on work experience, she says. “Mid-life career changers bring a wealth of experience, so they’re never starting from ground zero.”

Lucy’s advice resonates with me. I’ve been warmly welcomed. I’m learning, I’m mentally and creatively stimulated, I’m achieving... and I’m happily and fabulously exhausted.

Any momentary frustrations (secret small tears shed while learning editing software) have been more than made up for by the sense of achievement felt as I conquer hurdles, learn new skills and receive positive feedback.

French-born novelist Anaïs Nin once mused that “... the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom. Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. That is a kind of death.”

If you find yourself staring down the barrel of a blossoming bud, Lucy has practical advice to help move you forward. “Be super-clear about what matters to you, particularly from a values perspective. Whenever you align what you’re trying to do to your core values, you’ll often get the courage to push through your fears and do it anyway. Build confidence by reminding yourself of your achievements and what you do well. Try identifying what you actually enjoy and get energised by. Then use these as a prompt to recall examples of things you’ve achieved and have done well, because you have those strengths.” And most importantly: “Don’t compare yourself to others. That’s the single most effective way to reduce self-confidence.”

Immensely grateful I made the leap, I’m relishing learning to swim in these new waters. If you too are standing poolside, viewing water that looks scary, can I encourage you to rip off the floaties, snap on your goggles and launch yourself forward? Better yet, climb that high dive board and fly free. It really can be better and more fulfilling than you could ever imagine. ✨

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