

Mid-Career Re-invention: Finding Myself after Fifty

Insight from Gábor Purman, Associate Director Global Respiratory Development in Patient Solutions Team at Teva Pharmaceuticals, on how he managed a career transition that led to his dream job.

I had worked in commercial roles in the pharmaceutical industry for nearly 20 years. My most recent post was with GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) in London, where I spent a lot of time doing research behind the sales process. I engaged in exploration of patient behaviours, measuring what they did and did not know about specific diseases or medical conditions, etc. I was part of a customer experience (CX) team that explored patients' treatment journeys: from diagnosis to treatment on to how patients handle the emotional and rational aspects of treating their

In early 2014 I learned that my position at GSK would be cancelled based on an internal decision to downsize some operations. However, I didn't take this news in a negative way. I had just under a year to plan a transition and was certain that I would find a suitable job from among multiple internal roles that GSK had open at the time. Ultimately though, after submitting several applications, the right job match just wasn't there.

So I took this opportunity to do some thinking and deep reflection on what I wanted to do during the next 20-25 years of my life. Did I want to be self-employed or go the consultant route? Did I want to stay in pharma or move to another industry? Essentially, I used this moment to carry out a detailed self-evaluation of my professional skills and experiences.

My Process

Everyone approaches analytical and developmental processes differently. I tend

to engage in brain-storming-type assessments. So, once I understood that I would have to look for a new position outside GSK, I went to work making mind maps. I outlined all my skills and experience; focusing particularly on what type of jobs or roles I might find where I could make a true difference for customers and the given organization. With support from my family, I took a month to specify and define that direction of my job inquiry, i.e. what I really wanted to do in the next phase of my professional life. I also took advantage of outplacement support programs arranged by GSK and enrolled in one of their coaching programs. This included one-hour sessions with a professional coach every 3-4- weeks, which gave me important insight into how recruitment processes currently work, how to edit and improve my CV, how to write effective letters to HR departments and how to conduct impactful job interviews. The GSK-arranged support programs also provided other invaluable input that later helped in my job search: lessons in reputation management, using LinkedIn as part of the search process, etc. During the 9-month period for the redundancy package provided by GSK, I even had options to work with counsellors on analysing the pros and cons of corporate vs. self-employment.

Moving Forward

For me, the entire transition process lasted 7 months. However, these were seven months full of intense work and development of my personal job search tools. During that time, I sent out 35 applications for positions, where I thought I was a suitable candidate (i.e. roles in commercial sales, medical positions or CX-facing functions). I was strongly interested in jobs, where I could add value and make a real difference. Ultimately, I only interviewed for 5 jobs and got offers for 3 positions; and I used this process – specifically following up on rejections to job applications – to collect insight from various companies. I wanted to learn why my application was passed over or did not move forward. This helped me improve my

approach to companies in subsequent applications.

In April 2014, I was contacted by the UK offices of the pharma company, Teva. This was the start of an interesting, professionally-executed interview process that ran for roughly two months, and during which I learned that the roles we envision for ourselves can sometimes be different from those where we can truly succeed. For example, I applied for a role in the UK, but Teva recruiters told me they had a role for me in Amsterdam. Yet ultimately, I didn't end up in that second role, but rather a third (new) position in their Amsterdam offices. The role was my dream job: one where I got to work in a patient support program, while using my skills in behavioural and economic analysis.

Now I am in a situation where I commute between London and Amsterdam, since my family remained in the UK (due to my wife's career and our having children still in school). I have been lucky that my family is so open and flexible as regards my career change. Also, I work with a very supportive line manager in my new job, which has helped me better deal with spending time between two cities. Needless to say, the reality of commutes is much different from what it seems to be on paper or how we tend to initially imagine it. Yet, I now have my dream job and I wouldn't change that for anything in the world.

Lessons Learned: Key Factors that Informed My Professional Transition

Improve your self-awareness: the transition period allowed me to think not only about what I wanted to achieve in my future professional life, but also about what was/is my maximum future value for employers. I did my best to set up a professional structure for managing the entire application process: noting which companies had received my CV and reassessing where it made sense to follow-up and push for an interview, etc.

Bring clarity to your professional experience: one drawback that surprised

me during the search process was the breadth of my personal experience. When asking for feedback from different HR departments and recruiters, they told me they found my professional experience in multiple fields confusing. They asked why I hadn't chosen to focus on a specific area? Why had I seemingly dabbled in a little bit of everything? This led me to re-focus my CV writing and underscore how different skills or tasks served to fit a specific mission.

Start your job search early in redundancy situations: one lesson that became evident to me quickly in my search process was that I should have begun looking at external positions sooner. In some cases, there are options for internal transitions with your current employer, but this should not be taken as a given.

Understand job search as a learning process: for me personally, doing research and reading books on professional development and even industry trends were critical parts of my transition. I committed myself to not just researching what roles were available, but also to investigating the day-to-day tasks and skills needed for specific positions. At this point in my career, I didn't want just a job, but a great job! Additionally, I read a number of books on the importance of timing in the job search process.

Learn how to speak impactfully: since many interviews are conducted over the phone or on Skype, I found it very valuable to have consultations with a speech expert. She provided me with great tips on how to speak clearly and with confidence, which words to use, which words to avoid and how to sound authentic. I found this really important for making the right impression over the phone or on Skype.

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