



<http://www.careerjournal.com/myc/success/20011017-lublin.html>

How to Use Career Skills To Follow Your Passions

By Joann S. Lublin

From [The Wall Street Journal Online](#)

JOHN CHEN has bungee-jumped from 120-foot-high bridges, walked over 40 feet of red-hot coals and parachuted from a plane. What was his scariest feat? "Trying to figure out how to leave Microsoft," he says.

The software-design program manager finally quit the Redmond, Wash., technology giant in mid-1999. Now, Mr. Chen, a self-described experiential educator, leads individuals on life-changing adventures -- such as climbing nearby Mount Rainier. He doesn't regret his switch.

Nor do two other Microsoft "techies" who also forsook the fast-paced corporate environment to pursue more altruistic careers in Seattle. Peggy Foerch Fitzgerald became a "doula," or childbirth coach. Bruce Baker enrolled in divinity school and presently is a Presbyterian pastor.

At a time when many Americans are re-evaluating their professional choices, a look at the experiences of this trio of former Microsoft employees, who began their personal journeys years ago, offers guideposts for those struggling to redefine their contributions to society.

Caela Farren, a principal at career-development consultants MasteryWorks in Annandale, Va., says the Sept. 11 tragedy "will have a serious impact on people's careers." Numerous clients, she adds, are asking: "What am I doing with my life?"

THE THREE MICROSOFT alumni suggest some answers. First, avoid acting rashly. Make sure you embrace a well-conceived new role that goes beyond simply aiding others -- and be ready to accept a less-affluent lifestyle.

Mr. Baker, a born-again Christian and college physics major, says throughout his nearly four years at Microsoft he agonized over whether he should heed a pastoral calling. "I couldn't see myself as a pastor," the former general manager recalls. "I was a scientist."

As the sole parent of three young children following his wife's 1993 death from cancer, Mr. Baker feared that seminary school "was totally impractical." He left Microsoft in spring 1996 partly because he had amassed valuable stock options.

The gains "weren't a fortune, but it was enough for me to go to seminary," the 45-year-old pastor says. He graduated last June and joined University Presbyterian Church Sept. 5. He expects to be ordained on Dec. 5.

Mr. Chen, 34, and Ms. Fitzgerald, 36, also depend heavily on Microsoft option profits to supplement their reduced incomes. The doula makes less than \$10,000 a year because she limits her practice to one client per month. Her annual earnings exceeded \$50,000 at the peak of her Microsoft career.

When you swap a big-business job for a more altruistic pursuit, it's equally important to seek outside guidance. An executive coach assisted Mr. Chen in launching and running PlayTime, his life-changing-adventures enterprise. He operated the start-up part time during his final 2.5 years at Microsoft. Without the coach, he believes, "I would have abandoned [the venture] multiple times."

The educator now helps others navigate similar career crises through the Journey, his year-long class that features expert speakers and the Mt. Rainier ascent. Nine of the 23 initial participants have switched jobs.

At the seminary, Mr. Baker organized a support group for himself comprised of a nonprofit group board member, a Microsoft friend and a pastor from his church. The group met monthly to offer critical feedback during his moments of self-doubt about entering the ministry.

"You need people who can encourage you and hold you accountable for what's happening in your life" because they know you well, he explains.

TAKE ADVANTAGE of your transferable skills. Ms. Fitzgerald learned to deal with teams of strong personalities while a Microsoft contract technical writer and full-time program manager between 1989 and 1999. This talent

comes in handy when she works with physicians on behalf of expectant mothers.

Several of her clients have been Microsoft staffers who like her professionalism, empathy for their long hours and ability to talk just like them.

"The corporate world is a stepping stone," Ms. Fitzgerald observes. "Learn skills while you're there and then go off and do something to give back. It's boring to just get, get, get."

Once you've made such a transition, occasionally reinforce and reassess your choice. That's especially crucial if you're leaving a rapidly changing industry. "The longer I am a doula, the harder it will be for me to go back into technology," Ms. Fitzgerald concedes. "So I have to keep asking myself, 'Is this really what I want to do?' The answer is yes."

For a seminary assignment, Mr. Baker analyzed his leadership style's strengths and weaknesses along with "self-care" practices he planned to avoid burnout. He intends to read over his essay at least twice a year "to remember why I'm doing this."

During each of his last three years at Microsoft, Mr. Chen prepared a list of 36 things he had done that year that really made a difference. He recently revived the list. So far, nearly 75% of the 2001 items relate to PlayTime -- compared with just 6% involving Microsoft in 1998.

"I'm having a blast and I'm making a difference," he concludes. "Both are very important. I couldn't have one without the other."

Email your comments to cjeditor@dowjones.com.