
Maybe It's Not Too Late to Join the Circus: Books for Midlife Career Management

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ABSTRACT

MIDCAREER LIBRARIANS LOOKING FOR CAREER MANAGEMENT HELP on the bookshelf face thousands of choices. This article reviews thirteen popular career self-help books. The reviewed books cover various aspects of career management and provide information on which might be best suited for particular goals, including career change, career tune-up, and personal and professional self-evaluation. The comments reflect issues of interest to midcareer professionals.

No one is qualified for any job on the first day (Adams, 1998, p. 10).

IMAGINE THAT A LIBRARIAN is thinking about a midlife career change. What is the best way to move from thinking to action? A good suggestion would be a book about evaluating career changes, but which one? A search of a public library catalog yielded 1,205 vocational guides (<http://www.oclslib.fl.us/>) and Amazon.com listed 8,295! Even among the books aimed at midlife career changers, the offerings are extensive. This article will examine books on various aspects of career management and provide information on which might be best suited for a particular goal, such as changing careers, career tune-up, and personal and professional self-evaluation.

Career management can be defined as the process of developing the skills needed to choose and direct one's path in life (Cosgrove, 2000). Career management skills include the following:

- Self-evaluation—Identifying personal values, skills, interests, aptitudes, and abilities that may change throughout life.

- Planning process—Setting short- and long-term goals, decision-making with goals in mind, and adaptability to change.
- Integration—Integration of work and other life activities through lifestyle choices, balancing roles, selecting leisure activities, and personal growth.
- Exploration—Awareness of job markets and opportunities and pursuing self-development in relation to them.
- Marketing—Putting the other career management skills to use to improve a current career situation or career transition (Cosgrove, 2000).

The books in this article are evaluated for how well they help explore or develop these career management skills. Titles on the specific aspects of job-searching (i.e., resumes, cover letters, interviewing, job Web sites) are not included.

The selection process for the books included was not scientific. For the most part, the titles have stood the test of time. *Discover What You Are Best At* was first published in 1982 (Gale & Gale, 1998). *What Color Is Your Parachute* is in its 29th edition (Bolles, 2000). A few items are necessarily of newer vintage, such as, *Career Xroads*, which is a directory to job, resume, and career management sites on the Web, and even this title is in its fifth edition (Crispin & Mehler, 2000). Some titles, like *In My Wildest Dreams* and *I Could Do Anything If I Only Knew What It Was*, have made the New York Times best-seller list (Best Sellers, 1998). Overall, the books are popular titles that should be readily available. But while they may be popular best-sellers, not all are worthwhile.

Banning, K. B., & Friday, A. F. (1995). *Time for a change: How to change your career: The re-entry & re-career workbook*. Lincolnwood, IL: VGM Career Horizons. (171 pages) Retail: \$9.95

Time for a Change is specifically about changing careers. The topics covered run from taking stock of employment skills to preparing a resume, but the book does not cover any of the topics in depth. Each topic is covered in about ten pages and sections often include preprinted worksheets to be filled in. Unfortunately, there are no explanations provided to help explain or use the information gleaned from doing the exercises. For instance, one worksheet has readers list five areas where they lack self-confidence and then write down what they can do to raise their level of self-confidence in those areas (p. 41). Likely readers who can do that exercise without any guidance do not need a self-help book. The advice is also often very basic for a book aimed at career changers. In the chapter, "The Final Test: The Interview," the advice includes to be clean and not to wear low neck lines or high hem lines (p. 157).

This book is rife with gender stereotypes and the tone is patronizing. The authors treat career reentry as a woman's issue and career change as a man's issue, even though the advice that follows would not seem to change

had they left out the sexism. Women look for Mr. Perfect, stay home with the children, and need to update their makeup. Men need to change jobs due to health problems. Women's worries "include whether their wardrobe, hairstyle, or body image fit those of a working woman" (p. 32). The authors' advice on improving body image suggests that if you cannot lose weight "you are not committed to your decision for change . . . No one ever said change would be easy" (p. 55).

Bottom line: Awful. There are books with much better content and writing without the jarring tone.

Blanke, G. (1998). *In my wildest dreams: Simple steps to a fabulous life*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (254 pages) Retail: \$12.00

At the beginning of this article, career management was defined as the process of developing the skills needed to choose and direct one's path in life. *In My Wildest Dreams* focuses on how to choose the right path. This is not a book about the nuts and bolts of career management. It is an inspirational self-help book on how to "design the life of your dreams" (back cover). Blanke offers workshops on life redesign and the book takes the reader along with fifteen workshop participants as they model the processes described. The book is broken into two sections: breaking the grip of the past and designing the life of your dreams. Each chapter offers ideas, suggestions, and exercises to help the reader explore current realities and define and reach new possibilities.

Bottom line: If you want to do a general inventory of your life and hope to move in new directions, this book is a good choice. More readable than most follow-your-heart-and-live-your-dreams books. Not for those looking for serious career advice.

Boldt, L. G. (1999). *Zen and the art of making a living: A practical guide to creative career design* (rev. ed.). New York: Penguin/Arkana. (640 pages) Retail: \$17.95

For many, the title of this book will immediately rule it in or out. Those who prefer their career advice sans the spiritual and mystic will choose a different book. For others, its size, 640 pages, will make reading it seem like a career in itself. For anyone who is left, it is quite a good book and well written. After reading dozens of business and career books, it becomes apparent that literate prose is a scarce commodity. The author was a career consultant prior to writing this book (Center for Creative Empowerment, 2001). The book is comprehensive, covering all the skills needed for career management. The book can be used in a variety of ways to meet differing needs. It can be a life work-planning book; life work-planning being "creating a picture of the world you want to live in and then organizing your energies into building it" (Boldt, 1999, p. xxvi). The text can work as a how-

to career guide, giving specific information on a number of practical career issues from how to research a particular job to how to become a freelancer. The book can also function as a career-resource reference as the author has also included additional resource suggestions after each section, including readings, Web sites, networking resources, and professional services.

The book is organized into four sections. Each section provides specific how-tos, resources, and process work (i.e., exercises, worksheets, questions) (p. xxxiv). The first section, "The Quest for Life's Work," deals with identifying work purpose, talents, and objectives toward creating a vision for the world. "The Game of Life's Work" takes the individual's vision for the world and begins to express it in terms of work. "The Battle for Life's Work" develops a personal marketing strategy. Finally, "The School of Life's Work" develops a strategy for making a transition from a current situation into a new career.

Bottom line: Great book. It is "loaded with the practical, mundane material about finding a job" but with the added twist of including "an awareness of the sacred in the ordinary" (p. xvii).

Bolles, R. N. (2000). *What color is your parachute?: A practical manual for job-hunters & career-changers* (30th anniversary ed.). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press. (344 pages) Retail: \$16.95

No list of career books would be complete without *What Color is Your Parachute?* It is, according to the front cover, the best-selling job-hunting book in the world with over 6 million copies in print. Because it is so popular, and because the subtitle indicates it is also for career changers, it could easily be an initial choice. However, it is at heart a book about job-seeking skills not career management.

Bolles notes that this book is written at about an eighth-grade reading level and that he writes as he speaks (p. xix). The book seems most appropriate for students or those with little real-world experience. The book is organized around the three steps to job-hunting success: What do you have to offer the world? Where do you most want to use those skills? How do you obtain such a job? Suggestions and exercises are provided for each section. The epilogue and appendix might offer some help to someone looking at a midlife career change. The epilogue, "How to Find Your Mission in Life: God and One's Vocation," is a twenty-page guide to finding your mission in life (p. 240). It is written from a religious, "Christian perspective" (p. 243). Appendix A, "The Flower: A Picture of the Job of Your Dreams," is a forty-page set of exercises used to create a picture of the reader's ideal job.

Bottom line: Likely unsatisfying to a librarian who is looking to develop real career-management skills and not how-to job-search proficiencies.

Crispin, G., & Mehler, M. (2000). *CareerXroads: Career(cross)roads* (5th ed.). Kendall Park, NJ: MMC Group. (435 pages) Retail: \$26.95

The subtitle of this book, *The Directory to Job, Resume and Career Management Sites on the Web*, might mislead those interested in Web information on changing careers to purchase this book. In fact, this book has nothing to offer those seeking career-management advice. While the book defines career-management sites as those whose main focus is "information about careers, job searching and counseling," the working definition seems to be any site that is not specifically a resume or job-posting board (p. 81).

There is a one-page listing of career management sites that has forty-seven entries (p. 399). The reviews of the career-management sites (fourteen sites are reviewed in three pages) are not very helpful. Career Search ([www://www.careersearch.net](http://www.careersearch.net)) is described as an "Internet product that allows job seekers and others to search out companies by industry, specialty and location" (p. 9). Unfortunately, it fails to mention that it is a subscription-only service whose subscribers include "outplacement firms, career counselors, colleges and universities, executive search firms, dislocated worker programs, federal agencies, military bases, and state employment services" (CareerSearch, 2001).

Bottom line: This megalist of Web sites is not useful for a librarian exploring career options.

Gale, L. (1998). *Discover what you're best at: The national career aptitude system and career directory* (Rev. for the 21st century ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster. (181 pages) Retail: \$13.00

This book contains a career aptitude test that purports to measure what a person is capable of doing or of learning to do (p. 13). The author contrasts this with career interest inventories that identify what a person might like to do. Interest inventories do not assess the ability to learn or perform certain tasks. A career aptitude test identifies skills that the test-taker may not be aware she or he has. The book includes self-administered and self-scored tests that measure career aptitude skills in business situations, clerical speed and accuracy, logical reasoning, mechanical reasoning, numerical concepts, and understanding personal and social situations (p. 15). After taking the tests, the reader is guided through scoring the tests and identifying groups of careers that match identified skills.

There is no information given in the book on how the test was constructed, how the validity or reliability of the test was established, or what the credentials of the author are. Barry Gale and Linda Gale wrote the first edition of the book. The last page of the new edition notes that Barry Gale has died. The note mentions that he had "achieved degrees in education, counseling, and psychological testing" (p. 185). Linda Gale (now the sole author) is mentioned only as having been the coauthor of five career books (apparently all with Barry Gale). No educational credentials are listed for

Linda Gale. A search of the ERIC, PschyInfo, and Mental Measurements Yearbook databases (searched on SilverPlatter) yielded no articles on the National Career Aptitude System. There is no way to determine the accuracy of the results of this test.

Bottom line: For career aptitude and interest testing, there are better choices. Contact the career services office at your undergraduate or library school to see if they offer career testing. Community college career-services centers also often offer career testing. These centers offer established tests, like the Differential Aptitude Tests (DAT), Strong's Interest Inventory, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), generally at a nominal cost.

Helfand, D. P. (1999). *Career change: Everything you need to know to meet new challenges and take control of your career* (2nd ed.). Lincolnwood IL: VGM Career Horizons. (379 pages) Retail: \$14.95

Helfand, both a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and a National Certified Career Counselor, earned a master's degree in guidance and counseling and a doctorate in counselor education from Loyola University in Chicago. He is a member of the American Counseling Association, National Career Development Association, Career Planning and Adult Development Network, and the International Association of Career Management Professionals ("About the author," 2001). As one would expect from the author's credentials, this book is grounded in career-counseling theory. It is also well written and engaging.

The author states that the book is written for those who are considering or who are in the midst of a career change and that it pulls together in one volume strategies for dealing with the challenges of changing careers (p. vii). The book is divided into three parts: "Self- and Career Awareness: The Basis of a Successful Career Change," "Preparing for the Next Steps in Your Career Change: Strategies for Dealing with Challenges," and "Strategies for Groups with Special Challenges in the Workplace." The book provides tools and advice for self-assessment and details the steps for conducting a successful job search, including research, networking, resumes, and interviews. Strategies for groups with special challenges in the workplace (women, minorities, people over age fifty, etc.) are included. In short, *Career Change* covers all the skills needed for career management in an erudite, professional manner.

Bottom line: The best general career-management book reviewed.

Krannich, R. L. (2000). *Change your job, change your life: High impact strategies for finding great jobs in the decade ahead* (7th ed.). Manassas Park, VA: Impact Publications. (317 pages) Retail: \$17.95

The author of this book has a Ph.D. in political science and is a travel writer. Contrast this with the credentials of Helfand (*Career Change*) and decide who is more qualified to give career advice. *Change Your Job, Change*

Your Life is a how-to book about finding a job. The back cover sums up the contents as “cover[ing] everything from identifying today’s best jobs and employers to writing resumes, interviewing, and negotiating salaries” (back cover). Part I, “Prepare for Turbulence and New Opportunities,” discusses employment changes, trends, and predictions. Part II, “Develop Powerful Careering and Re-Careering Skills,” deals with the specifics of identifying skills and interests, setting goals, creating resumes, and looking for job openings. Part III, “Create Your Own Opportunities,” works through career evaluation, finding an ideal place to work, and starting a business. Part IV, “Get Started in the Right Direction,” gives suggestions on how to get started on a career change.

Krannich’s style is strident and light on support for the assertions made in the text. For instance, Krannich suggests that an employment trend ahead is the continued entry of women into the labor force “accounting for nearly 90 percent female participation in the labor force” (p. 38). No citation is given. Later, Krannich notes “women in the year 2006 are projected to constitute 47 percent of the labor force” (p. 51). The most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers show a level of female participation in the workforce at about 60% and male participation at about 74% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). While this may be only a quibble as to any one fact, the lack of documentation does make it difficult overall to rely on the statistics and predictions presented.

Bottom line: For people simply looking to change jobs. The content is not very useful or innovative. Use the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* that is available for free on the Web for information on specific jobs and employment trends. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* is a nationally recognized source of career information, designed to provide valuable assistance to individuals making decisions about their future work lives (<http://stats.bls.gov/ocohome.htm>). Revised every two years, the *Handbook* describes what workers do on the job, working conditions, the training and education needed, earnings, and expected job prospects in a wide range of occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). Although the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* targets junior and senior high school students, it also can assist college students and experienced workers, including those seeking to change careers or reenter the labor force.

Salmon, W. A., & Salmon, R. (2000). *The mid-career tune-up: 10 new habits for keeping your edge in today’s fast-paced workplace*. New York: American Management Association. (214 pages) Retail: \$17.95

This book takes a completely different approach to midcareer issues. The ten habits are ideas that can be used to make a current work situation better. Leaving a job is often a response to difficult pressures at work. This book suggests ways to make time spent at work more productive and fulfilling, as an alternative to changing jobs. As the authors describe it, there

are “specific actions you can begin to take to help you flourish and feel successful in your job” (p. 8).

The book offers practical advice and, while not everything may work equally well in every setting, everyone should find some of the ideas useful. The authors take the interesting approach that being successful and happy at work is a personal responsibility and suggest that responses to problems at work can be proactive rather than reactive (p. 7). Successful habits include balancing multiple demands on time and resources, developing productive relationships with the right people, and staying current and developing one’s own career (p. vii). For each habit, the book gives strategies, checklists, self-assessments, and action steps.

Bottom line: If the real source of contemplating a career change is your work environment, not the job itself, *The Mid-Career Tune-Up* is a good choice.

Sher, B., & Gottlieb, A. (1983). *Wishcraft: How to get what you really want* (1st Ballantine Books Trade ed.). New York: Ballantine Books. (278 pages) Retail: \$14.00

Sher, B., & Smith, B. (1995). *I could do anything if I only knew what it was: How to discover what you really want and how to get it*. New York: Dell Publishing. (322 pages) Retail: \$13.95

Sher, B. (1998). *It’s only too late if you don’t start now: How to create your second life after forty*. New York: Delacorte Press. (324 pages) Retail: \$13.95

How do you create the life you want? Enter prolific author Sher whose best-sellers make wishes come true, if you follow the directions. Sher’s books are for an older crowd who do not know what they want to be when they grow up. Chapter titles like “Don’t Panic, It’s Only a Midlife Crisis” and “The Courage to Live Your Life” (both from *It’s Only Too Late*) give a pretty good idea of what the books are like. It is midlife career-planning according to the Wizard of Oz. Find your true calling (you really do have a heart, a brain, courage), gather people around you to help you to your goal (a scarecrow, a tin man, a cowardly lion), and, in the end, you really had what it took to reach your dreams all along (knock your heels together). Now, cast Sher as the Good Witch Glinda and find “a richly rewarding career rooted in your heart’s desire” (Sher & Smith, 1995, back cover). The books are a pep talk with strategies for change sprinkled in. Sher writes in a breezy style and all of the books would be a quick read.

While these books are not traditional career-management manuals, each may help answer different questions that may come with midlife career indecision. *Wishcraft* is a self-help manual designed to identify dreams and how to achieve them. *I Could Do Anything If Only I Know What It Was* is designed to help people decide what they really want to do with their lives.

It's Only Too Late is aimed at someone in a midlife crisis (including a list of questions to diagnose a midlife crisis, like "Do you read plastic surgery ads and keep a secret file with phone numbers of surgeons?") (Sher, 1998, p. 2). Each book includes lots of exercises, techniques, and strategies.

Bottom line: If you want something to help you dream a little before you settle down to the nitty-gritty, these books might be appropriate. However, *In My Wildest Dreams* is a better choice (see above).

Tieger, P. D., & Barron-Tieger, B. (2001). *Do what you are: Discover the perfect career for you through the secrets of personality type* (3rd ed.). Boston: Little Brown. (386 pages) Retail: \$18.95

Most people at one time or another have taken the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and found out that they are an INFP (a good fit for a librarian according to the book) or any of the other fifteen possible combinations (p. 165). The MBTI is based on the work of Jung, Myers, and Briggs and measures psychological type. The four measured dichotomies are Introvert/Extrovert, Intuitive/Sensing, Feeling/Thinking, and Judging/Perceiving. These combine to make the sixteen possible personality types identified by the MBTI. Each type has common elements identified with it.

The basic premise of *Do What You Are* is that the right job flows out of the elements of your personality type (p. 9). This book lists what occupations are popular, typical work-related strengths and weakness, and suggested careers for each type. For those who do not know their MBTI type, Part One of the book describes how to determine individual type (but does not actually use the MBTI test) and explains the theory behind personality-typing. Part Two, which makes up three-fourths of the book, takes each of the sixteen types in turn and provides case studies, criteria for career satisfaction, popular occupations, and career-planning advice. Each type is covered in about fifteen pages.

For a midlife career changer who is looking for guidance on possible career choices, this type of book may be helpful. The MBTI has been thoroughly researched and career counselors use such tests. The ideas about personality and job fit could be used as a starting point to consider career changes. It is a more analytical approach to deciding what type of career might be most fulfilling than the dreams and wishes books (See Blanke and Sher) discussed in this article. Likely, the test approach will appeal to the Thinking types and the follow-your-heart approach will appeal to the Feeling types.

Bottom line: Cheap career counseling based on personality type. Actually taking the MBTI and using a book like *Career Change* by Helfand might be a better choice. *Career Change* is not focused exclusively on the MBTI but does discuss it and other career interest and aptitude tests. College and university career centers often offer the MBTI (and other career interest and aptitude tests) for a nominal fee.

As is evident from the discussion above, the quality of career-management books varies greatly. The background of the person writing the book appears to have the most influence on quality. Work or academic experience in career-counseling or a similar field is a pretty solid indicator that the book will contain useful information written in a style that won't make people who read for a living wince. It is generally a good idea to stay away from books written by people who support themselves solely by writing or by being motivational speakers. Books by the former tend to be written not in paragraphs and chapters but in lists and bullet points. Books by the latter tend to be long on shish boom bah and short on content. While not quite as clear an indicator, books published by professional associations (like the American Management Association) or specialty career-book publishers (like VGM Career Horizons) tend to be of better quality.

Let's face it; people struggling paycheck to paycheck are unlikely to be exploring the meaning of the universe when looking for a new job. Career guides are geared for one or the other of two types: people who just need to get a job (*What Color Is Your Parachute?*) and people who are looking to get more fulfillment out of their current job or are planning a career change (*Zen and the Art of Making a Living* and *Career Change*). For those looking to explore career issues, Helfand's *Career Change* is the best selection. For a more comprehensive meaning of life review, Boldt's *Zen and the Art of Making a Living* is an excellent choice. Salmon's *The Mid-Career Tune-Up* is recommended for everyone as the general career advice can turn around a current job or be used to help a new career stay on track.

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