

## **Trends from the Trenches: How others create career opportunities in challenging time**

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### **Summary**

This presentation is for those who feel stuck in their careers due to limited prospects: students, employed and under/unemployed geoscientists. If you've ever thought: "How do I advance when I've been stuck in the same role for 5+years?", you are not alone. Our old model of: "know what I want, do the work, and get the results" no longer applies the same way. As a geophysicist turned career coach, the top two questions I get asked are:

1. What do other people do?
2. How did you do a career pivot?

What geoscientists want to know are the common patterns and indicators of success when it comes to getting unstuck in your career. This presentation is an overview of the themes and patterns that I coach others through and that I myself have experienced.

### **Theory**

#### **Challenging Emotions Mean You're Doing It Right**

Professionals come to career coaching when they are missing a clear path to opportunity in their current role or job market. With this often comes a hidden assumption that there is something wrong with their past decisions or that they are lacking the right stuff to avoid these career oxbow lakes. This assumption that we should be happy all the time or that challenges shouldn't exist is a myth.

Studies show that the average person has multiple cycles of re-evaluating their career (Fraser-Thill, 2020). It is in these cycles that sorting out our personal and work values and our individual definition of what is fulfilling. After each iteration, people are typically happier and more fulfilled in their careers.

In any type of transition, challenging emotions like denial and disillusionment are normal. The Fisher Transition Curve is applicable in all change, even positive life events like getting married, having children or retirement. Reassuring oneself that a rollercoaster of emotions is normal and the necessary path to moving forward shifts people out of self blame and the feeling that they are alone. They then are free to move forward confidently, with realistic expectations.

## The Process of Transition - John Fisher, 2012 (Fisher's Personal Transition Curve)

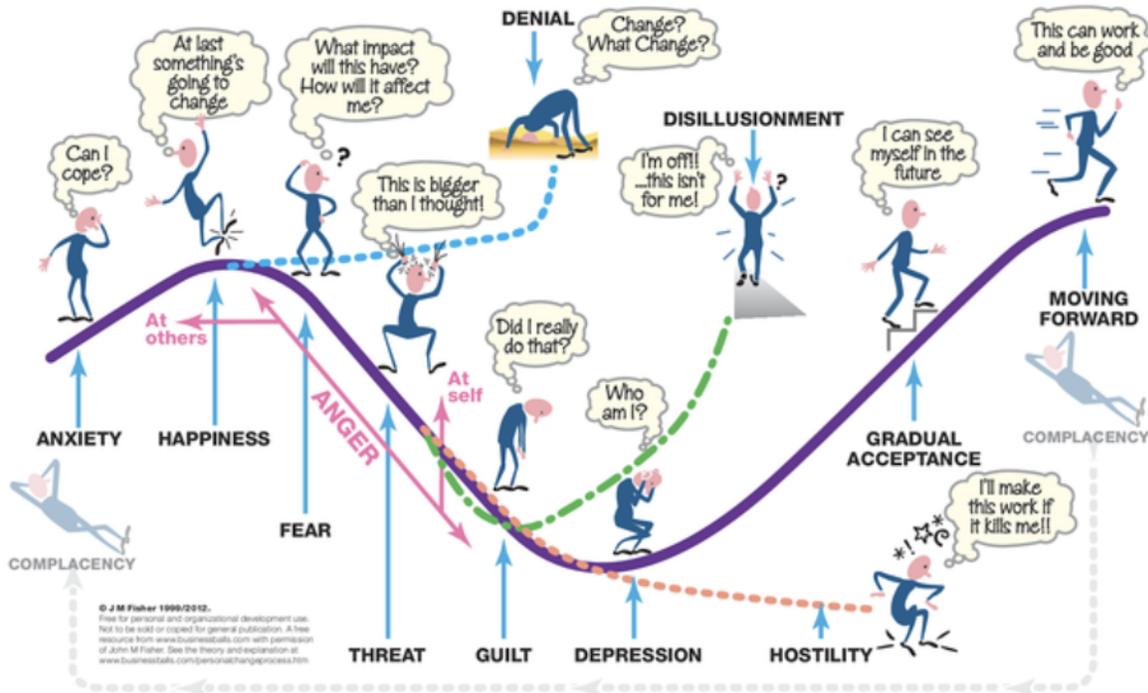


Figure 1: Fisher's Personal Transition Curve (Fisher, 2012)

### How to not be defined by how you imagined your career unfolding

Many professionals have an unspoken expectation of their career path as vertical, like a set of stairs. It is a series of steps of ever increasing responsibility and status, and is considered a traditional career path. This is increasingly uncommon in today's challenging job market between challenging commodity prices and the recent global pandemic. What most people experience is a spiral or tortuous career path that can be represented by a horizontal well or corkscrew.

Creating opportunities is not as simple as taking the next traditional step that many of us anticipated. Switching to a mental model that normalizes side tracks and multiple horizontal legs (just like in horizontal drilling) can free up creativity and flexibility. The resilience and adaptability are necessary in today's job market to take ownership of one's own career and pursue less traditional opportunities, often involving a combination of soft skills and technical skills to advance your career.

## **How to create future career options**

Today's job market puts the onus on the employee or job seeker to articulate what their value is and the problems that they can solve. This concept is referred to as personal branding. The Forbes Coaches Council calls this your "zone of genius" (Wiest, 2018): defined as your strongest skill combined with what is most personal meaningful. Career coaching is designed to uncover these attributes using self awareness and exercises to uncover personal values. The combination of your values and strengths is your unique contribution.

It is common to feel locked into a specific role or opportunities if we identify our strengths as hard or technical skills. The addition of soft skills and personal values is the key to what is transferable and broadens the opportunities available.

## **How do real people with financial obligations, families and doubts do this?**

There is no one right way to create career opportunities and new prospects, but there are common themes. The first is to create a supportive network of people who are positive and see opportunities. These often exist as networking, special interest or upskilling groups.

The second trend that I see as a hallmark of success is the ability to hope. When people believe that something can change their outcome, it creates changes in the brain as well as in behaviour. People who believe they can change their health eat more fruits and vegetables. Hope is not the belief that there will be only positive circumstances, but an attitude of openness and belief that one has the resilience to handle whatever comes up. This leads to action and goal setting (Neidich, 2021). This is familiar to us as geoscientists, because we are taught from the beginning of our education that there is no such thing as a failed experiment, only the failure to learn and iterate.

Finally, the most powerful tool that can be used is this desire to be continually learning. The most challenging part of creating new opportunities is that there is no timeline or countdown bar that tells you that you have progressed halfway towards your goal. The most common mistake that I see is people who either use the same techniques that aren't working for too long, or who quit too early. All of these things take time and persistence, and the most powerful thing you can do is track your efforts, and note what tactics are successful. Using feedback to refine and iterate on the strategies and approaches is key in making progress.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge all of the clients that I have worked with in the past two years who have inspired me with their courage, resilience and triumphs. I would also like to acknowledge Jackie Rafter and Higher Landing for the privilege of working part-time with their system and clients.

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