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## First steps to your second act

BY EVE D. BIRNBAUM

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A career counselor suggests doing a self-assessment by answering three key questions

### Photos



Eve Birnbaum speaking at a mentor program in July 2017 sponsored by the Association of Corporate Counsel -- New York City Chapter. Photo: Penny M. Williams

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The baby boomers are not retiring — ever! We've entered the era of the "never retirees." Every day, I encounter more and more clients, colleagues and friends who want to exit their "big jobs" while still remaining productive — and preferably by staying in the work force. Are you one of them?

Maybe you are a parent whose kids have left the nest (at least for now) and who has enough financial stability to consider leaving your high-paying job to pursue a passion. Or perhaps you simply want more free time.

Whatever your motivation, and wherever you are in your Second Act pursuit — whether in the dreaming stage or the ready-to-take action stage, and whether you know exactly what you want to do or just know that you don't want to keep doing what you are doing, the first step is to do a self-assessment and honestly answer three key questions.

#### 1. What do you most want to change?

Your first step to your first step is to prioritize what you most want to change about your current situation. The answer can be as mundane as carving out more time for yourself in your current job, or as dramatic as leaving your lifelong career cold turkey to do something completely different.

If you're at the pinnacle of a long career, any change will most likely result in a diminution in status and compensation. For this reason, you need to be clear about the change you are seeking and willing to make trade-offs to achieve it.

But before you turn to question 2, a word about "change." Change is always hard, and can be particularly difficult at this stage of life. Dr. Marian Getzler-Kramer, a veteran clinical psychologist, advises that "when clients respond by saying that they 'are too busy' or 'can't afford to' or 'don't have skills' ... to do anything else, it is often masking their fear of change, fear of losing identity, or simply fear of the unknown." In order to move forward, says Dr. Getzler-Kramer, you must explore the underlying fear, address it and open yourself up to risk.

Even if you have a financial or other reality that limits your ability to make a change right now, there is still value in doing the self-assessment and determining your priorities. There are changes you can make or aspire to make without diving headlong into your second act.

#### 2. What key strengths do you want to use in your second act?

Here you need to take stock of your skills, expertise and talents that have been valued and rewarded in your career. This includes personality traits (for instance, intellectually curious, quick study, personable) as well as work competencies (analytic skills, leadership skills, subject matter expertise). Identify which of these were not only



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important in attaining your current success, but also energize you and give you satisfaction.

It is not uncommon that the same skill or expertise that you are valued for in your current job is the one that makes you want to weep from boredom or burnout. Don't list these! This is exactly what you don't want to be doing in your second act. Find strengths that meet both criteria — you're good at it, and it energizes you when you use it. You will need to think in terms of skills and traits, rather than your actual job. The task is to break down your day-to-day activities into the specific discrete skills you use, as well as the roles you play at work. Finally, the strengths that you identify should also be ones that you can "sell" in seeking your second act. (For example: your even-tempered personality could be a key strength in your current workplace, but it's not "saleable," whereas your management skills can be easily articulated and sold.)

### 3. What are your work goals?

It's not enough to know what you don't want to do. While it may be too early in your journey to specifically know what job you want, you must identify what a positive end result would look like. At this stage of our lives, the goal is often "value-driven" — working for a particular cause or organization, or pursuing a particular passion or interest. Your goal could also be informed by identifying your key strengths, and finding a position that aligns better with those strengths than your current job.

Finally, it is important to recognize and accept that your second act may not afford you the external indicators of "success" that we have sought from the time we entered the work force. And by that I mean: money, status, title, big office, recognition or power. You will need to redefine "success" as achieving the change you are seeking, using the skills that energize you and being in the work environment that makes you happy.

Eve Birnbaum, founder of Eve Birnbaum Associates, career consultants, is a former law firm partner.

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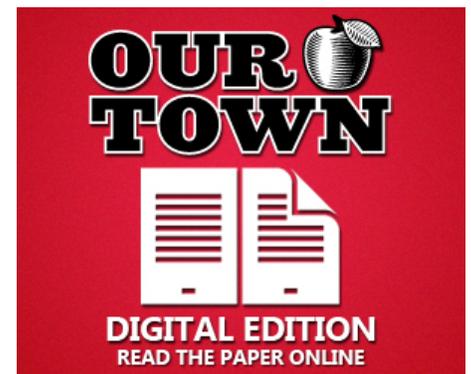
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