

Pivoting with Purpose: How I Used Project Management to Strategically Navigate Career Transitions^{1, 2}

Anna Ladipo, MBA, PMP®, CSM, FLMI



Abstract

Navigating major career transitions requires a proactive approach to capitalize on new opportunities. My multi-hyphenate journey spanning consulting, corporate leadership,

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entrepreneurship and academia illustrates how a career in project management can systematically enable professional evolution.

This paper explores how professionals can utilize project management skills to facilitate strategic career pivots. Amidst the constantly evolving business environment and job market of today, being able to intentionally navigate transitions across industries and roles has become a crucial capability.

We will discuss how treating career shifts as defined projects with clear goals, timelines and success metrics can enable more deliberate development. The paper outlines my suggested best practices for utilizing project management tools and mindsets to systematically expand one's professional repertoire over time.

Introduction

In today's business world and rapidly evolving job market, professionals face an increasing need to adapt and strategically navigate career transitions. Gone are the days of linear career paths and lifetime employment within a single organization, or static business models that last a lifetime. Instead, organizations and workers must proactively manage their businesses and careers, continuously innovating, acquiring new skills and exploring emerging opportunities to remain competitive.

This dynamic landscape necessitates a structured approach to innovative business and career development - one that enables organizations and professionals to systematically assess market trends, identify growth areas, and position themselves for evolving roles. Project management provides a compelling framework for facilitating these strategic business and career pivots, as exemplified by my personal journey.

In December 2013, I received unexpected news that my contract as an independent consultant at a large insurance company was ending in two weeks, this despite recent stellar performances on the project and assurances of a year-long extension. The abrupt change in my contract resulted from an acquisition and subsequent project cancellations that no longer aligned with the combined organization's strategic objectives. Unknown to me at the time, this catalyst would spark my transformation into a multi-hyphenate professional, with project management playing an integral role.

In this paper, I will explore how I practically applied project management principles to enable more intentional career transitions, drawing from my personal experiences pivoting into entrepreneurship and academia.

The Nature of Changing Career Paths

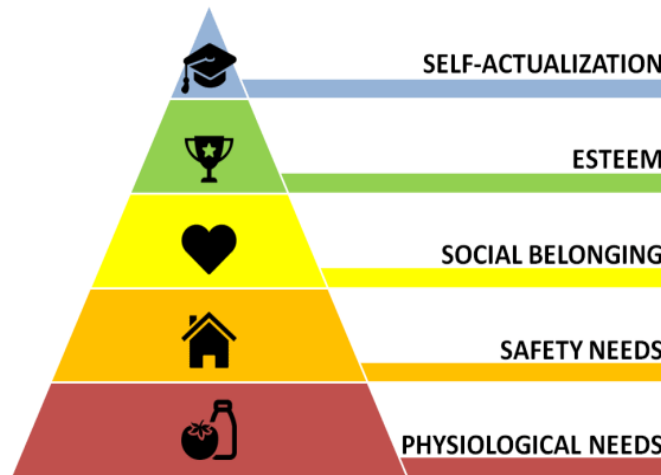


Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Created by Author

The professional landscape has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, marked by a significant shift from linear career paths to more dynamic, multi-hyphenate trajectories. This shift aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which suggests that as individuals fulfill their basic physiological and safety needs, they increasingly seek out opportunities for personal growth, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The traditional notion of climbing a singular career ladder within one organization has given way to a more fluid and adaptive approach to professional development, reflecting the higher-level needs in Maslow's hierarchy.

A 2019 Bureau of Labor Statistics survey found that the average person changes jobs 12 times throughout their career (BLS, 2019). Even more striking, a study by the World Economic Forum predicts that by 2030, 50% of all employees will require significant reskilling and upskilling to keep pace with technological advancements (WEF, 2020). These statistics underscore the increasing frequency and necessity of career pivots in the modern workforce.

When I embarked on my project management career, I envisioned a straightforward trajectory: starting as a business analyst, advancing to project manager, then program manager, followed by project director, and ultimately achieving the roles of director and VP of strategic initiatives... However, my professional journey quickly taught me that adaptability is the key to success in today's dynamic job market. My path took an unexpected detour when my contract as an independent consultant ended abruptly. This experience underscored the importance of financial security and proactive career management. Determined to never be in such a vulnerable position again, I embarked on a multi-faceted career that allowed me to apply my project management skills across various domains.

With project management as my anchor, I ventured into consulting, specifically in the insurance industry. Obtaining my Fellowship in Life Insurance (FLMI) distinguished me amongst other candidates and helped me establish a niche. I then explored entrepreneurship via self-learning by watching several training videos and listening to informational podcasts. Finally, academia borne out of a desire to help others navigate their paths.

Each pivot brought unique challenges and opportunities, but my project management background provided a solid foundation for success. I illustrate in the figure below, the different stages of my career pivots so far:

Career Pivot:	Consulting	Entrepreneurship (launched an online marketplace)	Academia
Goal:	Achieve financial independence and establish myself as a top-tier project management professional	Create a sustainable online platform that empowers and inspires fellow entrepreneurs by providing valuable resources and fostering a supportive community.	Positively impact and shape the lives of students by sharing knowledge, experiences, and guidance through engaging instruction, personalized coaching, and dedicated mentorship.
Timeline:	5 years	1 year	2 years
Budget:	\$120,000 Professional development investment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● MBA (Masters of Business Administration) to sharpen business acumen and leadership skills ● PMP to validate project management expertise ● FLMI designation to demonstrate mastery of life insurance fundamentals ● Industry specific training programs 	\$20,000 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invest in a turnkey e-commerce platform: ● Streamlined onboarding and customization ● Targeted promotional campaigns ● 	\$0 No direct financial investment required, as the knowledge and skills acquired through previous experiences serve as the foundation for this pivot.

Risks:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market saturation Changing industry regulations Technological disruptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market competition Rapid technological changes Cybersecurity threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balancing academic and industry demands Keeping curricula current Funding challenges
Constraints:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time required to acquire certifications and training Balancing consulting work with personal life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited initial budget Time constraints for launching the marketplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic bureaucracy Limited control over institutional policies
Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demand for insurance consulting services will remain steady Certifications will provide a competitive edge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a market need for the online marketplace The business plan will lead to success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching and mentoring will have a positive impact on students Industry partnerships will be mutually beneficial
Return on Investment (ROI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased earning potential Improved professional reputation Expanded network within the insurance industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential for significant financial returns Opportunity to create a lasting impact in the entrepreneurial community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal fulfillment from making a difference in students' lives Opportunities for research and thought leadership

Figure 2. Career Pivot Overview. Created by Author

My strategy for each career pivot:

1. Consulting in the Insurance Industry

- Leverage industry-specific knowledge and project management skills to solve clients' problems

- Build a strong network within the insurance sector

- Continuously update skills and knowledge to stay ahead within your niche
- Pursue relevant certifications as a differentiator in the marketplace

2. Entrepreneurship

- Apply project management principles to launch and grow a business
- Conduct thorough market research and develop a robust business plan
- Be ready to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and wear multiple hats
- Build a supportive network of mentors and advisors

3. Academia

- Use practical experience to bring real-world insights into the classroom
- Develop engaging curricula that prepare students for the workforce
- Collaborate with industry partners to bridge the gap between academia and practice
- Pursue research and publishing opportunities in your field

Throughout my career pivots, project management remained a constant anchor, providing a framework for problem-solving, planning, and execution. By treating each transition as a project with defined goals, milestones, and success metrics, I navigated the challenges and opportunities of each new role.

Additional tips for managing career pivots:

1. Embrace lifelong learning: Continuously update your skills and knowledge to stay relevant and adaptable.
2. Build a strong network: Cultivate relationships with professionals across industries to open up new opportunities and gain insights.
3. Be proactive: Actively seek out new challenges and experiences that align with your goals.
4. Embrace failure as a learning opportunity: Not every pivot will be successful, but each experience offers valuable lessons.
5. Stay true to your values: Ensure your choices align with your personal values and goals.

My personal journey demonstrates that career paths are no longer linear and that adaptability is essential for success. By anchoring my career in project management and applying its principles to each pivot, I navigated the challenges and opportunities of consulting in the insurance industry, entrepreneurship, and academia. Embracing lifelong learning, building a strong network, being proactive, learning from failure, and staying true to your values are key strategies for managing successful career pivots in today's ever-changing business terrain and job market

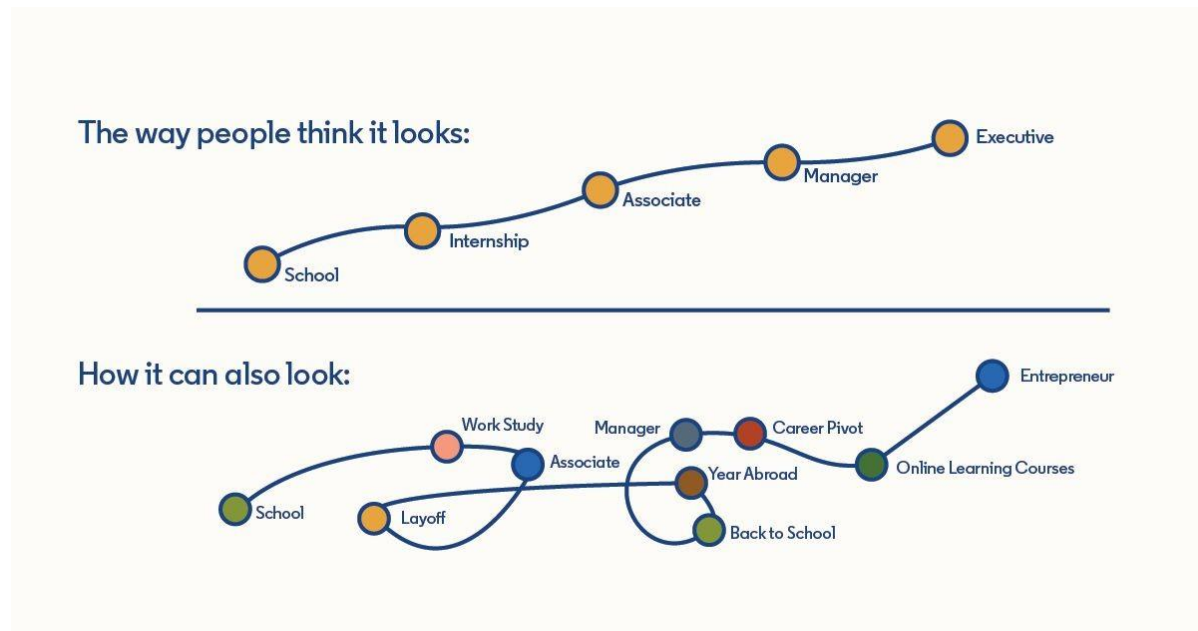


Figure 3. Life Is Never Linear. My Career. Visualized... Created by Neil Patwardhan

Project Management Principles for Career Transitions: A personal journey

Navigating career transitions can be a daunting task, but by employing project management principles, you can approach these pivots with greater clarity. Here are some of the essential project management principles I've leveraged to navigate career transitions leading to successful outcomes.

1. Setting Clear Goals and Success Metrics

- Define your desired career path and identify the skills and qualifications needed to succeed
- Set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals
- Create revenue projections and track your net worth to guide your financial decisions

Tip: Break down your larger goals into smaller, manageable milestones to maintain motivation and momentum.

When I found myself at a crossroads after my contract abruptly ended, I set a clear goal to find alternative income sources.

2. Defining Timelines and Milestones

- Use tools like Gantt charts or even excel spreadsheet to create timelines and tasks for achieving your goals

- Set target dates and reminders for completing certifications, attending networking events, or submitting job applications

- Regularly review and adjust your timelines as needed to stay on track

Tip: Celebrate each milestone achieved along the way to maintain a positive outlook and stay motivated.

In my own career journey, I used Gantt charts to plan and track my progress towards key milestones. I also use spreadsheets to track my net worth. By breaking down these larger goals into smaller, manageable tasks and setting target dates for completion, I was able to stay organized and motivated throughout the process.

3. Risk Management and Mitigation

- Identify potential risks, such as financial instability or lack of relevant experience
- Conduct thorough risk assessments and develop strategies to minimize their impact
- Create contingency plans to address potential setbacks or challenges

Tip: Be proactive in addressing risks and be open to adapting your plans as circumstances change. When considering over a \$100,000 MBA investment, my spouse and I thoroughly assessed the risks and created a three-year plan to recoup the costs through continued contract work. By proactively identifying and mitigating potential risks, I was able to make an informed decision and confidently pursue my educational goals.

4. Data-Driven Decision Making

- Research salary data, industry trends, and job market projections to inform your career decisions
- Use data to create business plans and analyze potential returns on investments
- Regularly review and analyze your progress data to make informed adjustments to your strategy

Tip: Seek out mentors or industry experts who can provide valuable insights and guidance based on their own data-driven experiences.

Throughout my career transitions, I relied on data to guide my decisions and assess my progress. From creating a business plan for my online business to analyzing the potential returns on my real estate investments, data-driven decision-making has been a critical component of my success.

5. Continuous Monitoring and Improvement

- Regularly reassess your skills and identify areas for growth and development
- Seek feedback from mentors, colleagues, or professional networks to gain new perspectives

- Continuously update your resume and professional profiles to reflect your latest accomplishments

Tip: Embrace a growth mindset and view setbacks as opportunities for learning and improvement.

In my own journey, I made a habit of checking my performance monthly by tracking my net worth and documenting any shortfalls. This practice allowed me to make informed adjustments to my strategy and continuously improve my approach. By regularly reassessing my skills and seeking feedback from others, I was able to identify areas for growth and development, ultimately leading to greater success in my career transitions.

6. Effective Communication

- Recognize the importance of effective communication in networking, interviewing, and collaborating

- Invest in training or resources to improve your communication skills

- Consider sharing your knowledge and experiences through writing, speaking, or mentoring others

Tip: Practice active listening and seek to understand others' perspectives to build stronger professional relationships.

Recognizing the importance of effective communication in my own career journey, I took steps to improve my skills in this area. I invested in training and ultimately authored a book titled "Strategies for Effective Communication for Professionals." By honing my communication skills, I was better equipped to network, interview, and collaborate with others throughout my career transitions.

Validating Career Pivots Through Pilot Initiatives

Embarking on career transitions can be intimidating, but by employing a tactical strategy of validating novel directions through small-scale pilot projects, one can pave the way for fruitful transformations. This method allows individuals to test the waters, gain valuable experience, and make informed decisions before fully committing to a new direction. A notable example of someone who successfully navigated multiple career pivots using this approach is Elon Musk.

Elon Musk, the visionary entrepreneur behind companies like Tesla and SpaceX, has demonstrated the power of validating career pivots through pilot projects. Early in his career, Musk recognized the potential of the internet and co-founded Zip2, a company that provided online city guides and business directories. This pilot venture allowed him to validate his interest in technology and entrepreneurship. The success of Zip2, which was eventually acquired by Compaq, provided Musk with the confidence and resources to pursue larger ambitions.

Similarly, in my own career journey, I have applied the same principles of piloting initiatives before fully venturing into new roles. As a business analyst, I recognized my goal of managing large-scale projects. To validate this pivot, I proactively sought opportunities to manage small projects within my current role. The success of these pilot projects not only confirmed my aptitude for project management but also provided tangible evidence of my capabilities when seeking new opportunities. By strategically changing companies, I was able to accelerate my growth and take on larger projects, ultimately reaching my goal in the shortest amount of time.

This approach of piloting initiatives has been a recurring theme in my career. When I developed an interest in the e-commerce space, I began by selling items from my home and listing them on social media and marketplaces. This small-scale pilot allowed me to test the market, understand the dynamics of online selling, and validate the potential for growth. The success of this initiative led me to explore running a jointly owned online marketplace before eventually establishing my own e-commerce venture.

Similarly, when I discovered my passion for teaching, I started by engaging with a small training institute on a part-time basis. This pilot experience provided valuable insights into the world of education and confirmed my sense of fulfillment and enjoyment of teaching. I then progressively expanded my involvement, becoming an adjunct faculty member at a community college and later at a university. These experiences served as steppingstones, allowing me to validate my fit within academia and build a strong foundation for my eventual position as a non-tenured faculty member at the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD).

Piloting initiatives before fully committing to a career pivot offers several advantages. It allows individuals to gain practical experience, develop relevant skills, and build a network within the new field. These experiences provide valuable insights into the day-to-day realities of the new role, helping individuals make informed decisions about their future direction. Furthermore, the success of pilot projects serves as compelling evidence of one's capabilities when seeking new opportunities or negotiating career advancements.

Conclusion

In conclusion, navigating career transitions in today's dynamic professional landscape requires a proactive and strategic approach. By applying project management principles to career pivots, individuals can effectively validate new paths, minimize risk, and maximize their chances of success. The five key principles derived from my personal experience - starting small, seeking opportunities within current roles, leveraging networks, being proactive and adaptable, and celebrating milestones - provide a practical framework for executing this approach.

My own multi-hyphenate journey spanning corporate leadership, academia, entrepreneurship, and consulting demonstrates the power of validating career pivots through pilot initiatives. By treating career moves as defined projects with clear objectives, milestones, and success metrics, individuals can systematically expand their professional repertoire and capitalize on emerging opportunities.

Ultimately, the changing nature of career paths demands a commitment to continuous learning, adaptability, and strategic risk-taking. By applying project management principles to validate career pivots through pilot initiatives, individuals can cultivate the resilience and agility needed to thrive in an ever-evolving world of work. Armed with these strategies, professionals can proactively shape their own growth, make meaningful contributions across domains, and actualize their full potential in our world of constant change.

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About the Author



Anna Ladipo

North Texas, USA



Anna Ladipo is an accomplished leader bridging IT consulting, academia, and entrepreneurship. With over 15 years of experience, she is a seasoned Senior IT consultant skilled in spearheading strategic projects and programs for Fortune 500 companies.

Beyond consulting, Anna excels across diverse roles including college/university professor, ecommerce business owner. She holds an MBA from Queen's University along with esteemed credentials such as Project Management Professional (PMP), Certified Scrum Master (CSM), and Fellow of Life Management Institute (FLMI).

As a multi-faceted professional, Anna brings proven excellence across project delivery, strategic execution, teaching, and social impact. Her blend of capabilities enables driving change across the intersections of tech, business, education, and advocacy. Anna thrives on empowering organizations, students, and communities to reach their highest potential.

Anna can be contacted at info@annaladipo.com

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/annaladipo>

Website: <https://www.annaladipo.com/>