

Discover how other fitness professionals have transformed their careers to ensure continued success—and how you can, too!

CAREER metamorphosis

By April Durrett

You pride yourself on your dedication to helping clients maximize their health and fitness; but to continue helping clients, you need to stay engaged and enthusiastic about your work. How do you do this? Many people manage to stay fresh through change.

Is it time for you to make a radical or more subtle change in your career? Look at how other fitness professionals have shifted their careers: why they've changed, what they are doing now and how it's benefited them.

>> Career Changer: Anthony Carrillo

Long Island, New York



[Old Job] CPA in public and private industry for 17 years.

[Why He Changed to Fitness] After being caught up in his third corporate layoff in 17 years, he decided corporate America was no longer for him. He was teaching fitness classes part-time, so he chose to follow his passion and try a career in fitness. He set himself a 1-year plan, thinking he could return to the accounting world if things didn't work out.

[New Job] Group exercise instructor. He teaches indoor cycling, muscle sculpting and his "Iron Yoga" creation, which involves upper-body weight training with dumbbells while performing power yoga poses.

[Why He Likes Fitness] "I love to teach and coach; to use my imagination to create challenging workouts and motivate individuals to bring out their highest energy level and attain their peak performance," says Carrillo.

Changing Group Fitness Clientele

Some fitness professionals alter their career paths because of a specific event, while others shift focus owing to a growing dissatisfaction with their current careers.

Janice H. Hoffman of Portland, Oregon, stopped teaching fitness classes to healthy adults after her daughter's death from cancer. "My priorities changed dramatically regarding the meaning of wellness," she says. "I had developed a new appreciation for how someone struggles to regain a sense of control after a disabling health issue. I wanted to use that hard-earned knowledge. It also became harder to return to teaching fitness to young moms and hearing about their children."

Hoffman received a call from a former coworker who was now the coordinator at a community center and needed a seniors' instructor. "All the women in the class were widows," says Hoffman. "Because I had lost my daughter, I bonded with the group. I started with two classes a week, but added more classes and eventually became the fitness coordinator."

Turning to Personal Training

Many fitness professionals find personal training an attractive career path or a stimulating addition to a current career.

Training Clients in Pilates. Veteran fitness professional Norma Shechtman, MEd, MA, has made many changes in her fitness career, usually when her passion for a job has subsided. This 2003 ACE Group Fitness Instructor of the Year discovered the joys of Pilates and liked it so much that she became the Pilates coordinator for The Sports Club/LA—Orange County in Irvine, California. She now trains clients in private Pilates sessions 20 hours a week, in addition to teaching Pilates mat and other classes.

Training Specialty Clients. Linda Rosen of Fitness Works in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, was a group exercise instructor for 16 years, but she wanted to address musculoskeletal and overuse injuries—both her own and her students'. "By luck I found an ad in IDEA Health & Fitness Source for a course by the American Association of Health, Fitness and Rehab Professionals," she says. "I became certified as a medical exercise specialist (MES) and now—in addition to teaching classes—I work one-on-one with clients who need special care."

From Part-Time to Full-Time Training. Three years ago Holly Kouvo of Stow, Massachusetts, started personal training part-time in a health club while working in high tech. When she was laid off, she launched Fitting Fitness In, training mostly home-based clients. "As a high-tech manager, I helped employees set and achieve goals," she says. "I knew I could assist clients in setting goals and fitting fitness into their busy lives."

A Business Shift

Some veteran fitness professionals use their business expertise to run their own companies in satisfying ways that mesh with the rest of their lives.

General Manager to Personal Trainer and Business Owner. In 1987 Peter Churchill started his own personal training business. However, that same year a colleague whom Churchill respected recruited him to be the fitness director at a club, so he closed his business. He later became general manager at this club, where he stayed for several years. Eventually, it was time for a change. "I had put all this entrepreneurial thought into building a business for someone else, but I wanted to build my own business and see how far I could go," he says.

Four years ago his wife Ivana Junek opened Studio A in Beaconsfield (Montreal), Quebec, to run Danse Aerobikidz, featuring dance and hip-hop classes and competitive team dancing for children. A year and a half later Churchill opened up the High Performance Center for personal training and sports conditioning as part of the same business. He does 10–20 hours of personal training a week, manages the personal training business, takes care of the facilities and helps with the teams his wife coaches.

Business Owner to Consultant and Personal Trainer. As a long-time fitness professional, Valerie Pokorny has a lot of experience running businesses, including co-operating Super Shape Inc.: A Fitness Service Corporation in East Detroit, Michigan. In 1996, however, the driver of a car she was riding in ran a red light. She suffered—and still suffers from—severe spinal trauma with chronic pain. She had to quit all business activity. Since she was already taking college classes, she decided to become a full-time student. She graduated with a double major in executive management and exercise science while undergoing rehabilitation for her injuries. Pokorny later developed Shape Management: Professional & Personal Development Consulting Services in Naples, Florida, and diversified her career to ac-

commodate her new sedentary lifestyle. She now does personal training 30 hours a week in the high season, 20 in the off-season, and helps professionals develop their mission statements and business structures. She also works with Fitness First, demonstrating and educating professionals on Fitness First products at industry trade shows.

Innovative Careers

Other fitness professionals carve out career opportunities that build on skills from their current jobs.

Phone Coaching. About 2 years ago Debi Lander, MEd, CSCS, of Healthwise Fitness moved from Baltimore to Jacksonville, Florida. She had slowly established her own business in Baltimore but had to leave her clients behind. She became a Fitness by Phone® coach as a way to train these clients and work with new ones.

Scientific Research Assistant. Hoffman's career grew in another direction when the Oregon Fibromyalgia Foundation asked her to be the fitness instructor for a 4-month research study on exercise and fibromyalgia at Oregon Health and Sciences University in Portland. That position blossomed, and she's currently working on a new study as a fitness professional and fibromyalgia research assistant.

Founder of a Nonprofit Association. "I was working hard to put in a quality effort with clients, but other trainers at the club weren't doing the same," says Ellie Ciolfi, CCS, NSCA-CPT, an IDEA Elite Personal Fitness Trainer in Timonium, Maryland. Frustrated, she left the club, rented space and opened her own training business. She also formed a nonprofit corporation called Strength in Numbers Inc. This organization conducts ongoing 6-week fitness training modules for women at domestic violence/sexual assault centers. So far Ciolfi has volunteered her time to assist these women, but with the help of her nonprofit board she hopes to secure grants to pay for the program and expand it to other cities.

Developing Training Products. Stephen Holt, CSCS, of StephenHoltFitness.com and SportsTrainingInfoproducts.com in Lutherville, Maryland, shifted away from doing 100% personal training in order to earn more money. "My rates couldn't get much higher in my particular market," he says. "I was already doing over 50 sessions a week and charging more than the other trainers in a club where we all charged more than trainers in [nearby] clubs. After the tragedy of 9/11, I didn't want to travel as much, and other trainers didn't want to travel as much, but they still needed to learn. I decided to train less and develop educational products via the Internet."

Reaping Benefits From Change

Changing or diversifying fitness careers can bring numerous benefits, including re-igniting fitness professionals' love for their field.

"I consider the transition I made from general to special populations to be the best move of my professional life," says

>> Career Changer:

Mary Youakim

Chicago



[Old Job] Assistant project manager at a marketing firm, then administrative assistant.

[Why She Changed to Fitness] After being laid off from her marketing job during the business downturn after 9/11, she settled for an administrative assistant job that made her miserable. Meanwhile, she had been training in the martial arts and a friend suggested she use this knowledge. She walked into a nearby gym, was hired and quit her other job.

[New Job] Certified personal trainer and kickboxing teacher, Xsport Fitness.

[Why She Likes Fitness] "This is by far the most rewarding and challenging job I have ever had," says Youakim. "I love helping people to be healthy and feel good about themselves, and also to help them reach their goals."

>> Career Changer:

Doug Slobodien

Long Valley, New Jersey



[Old Job] Freelance photographer, then full-time parent.

[Why He Changed to Fitness] When his first son was an infant, he volunteered at the YMCA in exchange for a family membership. He helped members learn how to use the weight equipment and found it fascinating. That was 15 years and 30 certifications ago!

[New Job] Instructor and personal trainer at Riverside Health & Fitness in Mansfield, New Jersey; also holds nine part-time jobs and five volunteer positions.

[Why He Likes Fitness] "I enjoy the constant influx of research and information," says Slobodien. "By leaving myself open to opportunities that have presented themselves, I have found that the fitness industry has led me to some wonderful places and fascinating people."

Hoffman. "I enjoy it when my students with fibromyalgia have 'aha' moments and understand they are gaining some control over their disease. I also feel I'm contributing to the knowledge base about this disease."

Churchill feels re-inspired because he is less stressed. "Initially it was very unsettling to walk away from a 70-hour workweek," he says. "Looking back, I realized that what I was doing was insane. As an entrepreneur, I work really hard, but the focus is different. I feel more in control than I did as a club manager, and I'm back to what I love about fitness: working with clients."

>> Career Changer: Jamie McInnis

Calgary, Alberta



[Old Job] Mom, clerk in running store.

[Why She Changed to Fitness] She had done aerobics since the early 1980s and was certified as an instructor before she was married. When she was home with four babies under four, walking—which turned into running—was her salvation. After she divorced her abusive husband, she took a part-time job in a running store. There she met the owner of a land survey company. He hired her to train his staff to run the city's half marathon, which his company was sponsoring.

[New Job] Health/fitness consultant and personal trainer for Crape Geomatics; also works with other contracts as a personal trainer, a running coach and an ergonomics consultant.

[Why She Likes Fitness] "I have worked with many people who have inspired me," says McInnis. "Some have dealt with great trauma and they pick up, smile and carry on. Being able to help people achieve their goals, laugh, get fit and live makes me proud."

Financial Benefits. Now that Rosen is doing private training sessions, she is earning more money. Likewise, Hoffman has found that the pay from exercise classes for fibromyalgia research study participants is rewarding, just about double what she earned before.

Holt's career change means he, too, is earning more money—while putting in less stressful hours. He used to work 14-hour days. Now he trains a maximum of 8 hours a day (6 on average) and says he spends about 2 hours a day working "on" (rather than "in") his business.

Physical Benefits. Shechtman says that the private Pilates sessions she gives allow her to make more money without hurting her body through teaching too many group classes.

Holt says that spending less time training clients has helped him feel better. "Ironically, the more hours I put into one-on-one training, the less I worked out, the less I slept and the worse I ate. Taking back control of my schedule has made me healthier in every way possible."

Mental Benefits. "Starting my organization and my own personal training business have meant stepping out of familiar territory and learning new skills," says Ciolfi. "I'm learning to network better, to polish my conversational skills and to explain myself succinctly in writing." Becoming a Fitness by Phone coach has given Lander the opportunity to learn more about technology such as heart rate monitors and accelerometers. She has also discovered that she loves writing. She writes a monthly e-mail newsletter and is writing a book on running marathons for women over 40.

A Better Work/Life Balance. Kouvo finds her new career as a full-time trainer gives her more time with her children. "I wanted to be more a part of my children's lives. They are happier because they see me more," she says.

For Churchill, the work-life balance is also better. He and his wife now have two children. His new role gives him the flexibility to share parenting responsibilities and time to travel with his family.

New Doors Opening

When fitness professionals have actively sought changes or said yes to openings, they've found that other opportunities arise.

Helping Other Fitness Professionals. Because Churchill has a more flexible and less stressful schedule, he has been able to take on the provincial director's role—a volunteer position—for the National Strength and Conditioning Association. "I am excited to develop more educational opportunities for other strength coaches in this area," he says.

Getting Writing Assignments. After founding Strength in Numbers Inc., Ciolfi was asked to write articles for SmartWoman magazine. "Founding Strength in Numbers helped me get the writing assignments. I'm now seen not just as an ordinary trainer but as someone with this serious accomplishment. The editor also wrote a story on me that will get [my organization] some more exposure and hopefully open more doors. Strength in Numbers has also given me exposure to people I would not have met in my ordinary life as a trainer, and some of these people have wanted to hire me."

Creating Educational Materials. Hoffman's work led to her being asked to choreograph and lead two fibromyalgia exercise videos, and she is now writing a correspondence course on the subject. She is often asked to lead breakaway exercise sessions for fibromyalgia conventions.

Working With Websites. Hoffman was also asked to write video reviews for Homeworkout.com, and she later designed and worked on the HTML code for the Web pages. This project introduced her to Web design work, which she found she loves. She now combines her fitness career with Web design work through her company jumpstartwebworks.com. "I don't think I would have been open to these opportunities before," she explains. "Before I stayed in my comfort zone. As things have changed, I've decided to honor my daughter by living my life to the fullest rather than holding back."

Working With Different Health Professionals. Rosen says that she has been able to open more doors for herself with the confidence and credibility she's received through her MES certification. "I feel comfortable talking to and getting referrals from chiropractors and massage therapists. I'm looked at differently by them because of my MES knowledge," she says.

How Change Helps Clients

When fitness professionals transform their careers, the changes often benefit clients as well.

Becoming a Better Trainer. Ciolfi finds that working with women who've experienced domestic abuse has helped her become a more empathetic trainer and better listener with her other clients. "This work showed me that not everyone is always on the same page and sometimes I can have more impact by taking a different approach," she notes.

>> Tips for Changing Your Career

How is your fitness career going? Do you want to change it? If so, consider these suggestions from fitness professionals who've successfully navigated change in their own careers.

[Change Regularly] Peter Churchill, owner of Studio A, High Performance Center, in Beaconsfield (Montreal), Quebec, advises making some kind of career shift every 3–5—preferably 3—years. “I think you do your best learning and development in the first 1–2 years and then you can use the next year(s) to cash in on the knowledge,” he says. “Before you get too comfortable, move on.”

[Take a Risk] Churchill encourages fitness professionals to change if they've been thinking of it. “If you've had great ideas that you haven't had a chance to do something with because your circumstance hasn't allowed it, change your circumstance,” he notes. “Follow your passion. You can always go back and get a job like the one you had. Research the new opportunity well and, if it makes sense, give it a try!”

[Say Yes to Opportunities] Janice H. Hoffman, fitness professional and fibromyalgia research assistant at Oregon Health and Sciences University in Portland, Oregon, says that adding to your knowledge base gives you more options. “Because I prepared myself with knowledge, was open to possibilities and didn't let opportunities go because they weren't necessarily comfortable, I was able to go with the flow and let these changes occur,” she says.

[Find a Mentor] “Change is easier if you have a mentor to give you advice and help you along,” says Holly Kouvo of Fitting Fitness In in Stow, Massachusetts. “One reason I was successful in my career change to personal trainer is that my mentor, Kathy Ekdahl, let me shadow sessions with clients and recommended me to other fitness professionals; she still refers clients to me.”

[Don't Make Big Changes for the Wrong Reason] While change can be a positive experience, consider carefully whether it's the right time to make a certain change. “Before changing, think about whether you're just feeling frustrated,” says Ruth Mannich, MMT, coordinator of the Prime Time Program at Cross Gates Athletic Club in Slidell, Louisiana. “Talk through your ideas with supportive people. It might just be time to make a small change, but not a big one.”

>> Career Changer:

Ruth Mannich

MMT, Slidell, Louisiana



[Old Job] Director of the creative arts therapy department at a private psychiatric hospital in New Orleans.

[Why She Changed to Fitness] She was nationally established as a music therapist, but got married and decided to go wherever her husband's job took them. She moved to two rural areas in a row where she was unable to find jobs comparable to her previous one. She decided to use the fitness skills she'd gained from teaching part-time in the past and ended up creating and running an award-winning fitness program for a county senior services center.

[New Job] Coordinator of the Prime Time Program at Cross Gates Athletic Club.

[Why She Likes Fitness] “Fitness has provided me with a career that I have been able to adapt to any location,” says Mannich. “I enjoyed making a difference as a therapist, and I feel the same about fitness. I like to see people feel good about themselves.”

Helping People Who Need Special Training. Now that Rosen is an MES, she is qualified to work one-on-one with clients who have physical problems. Because these clients need specialized knowledge, they haven't always been able to find an appropriate trainer before. Her knowledge also makes her a much better group instructor. “I teach more interesting, challenging group classes and can work with all types of populations with more assurance, knowledge and expertise,” she says.

Helping Clients Become More Empowered. Lander thinks that when she works with clients as a phone coach rather than a trainer, the clients learn more and are better able to monitor their workouts. “My clients learn to use their activity and heart rate monitors to track their workouts,” she says. “When they fill in their own diaries, they see if they are progressing or falling off. They are making great progress and are learning to be accountable to themselves.”

Daring to Change

Want to change? “Jump and the net will appear,” says Holt. “To be happy and successful, you have to take a ‘chance.’ But when you go in with confidence—and there's no reason not to!—it's not really a ‘chance’ at all.”

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