The allure of choosing a whole new direction

CHANGING CAREERS: Professionals are on the move from well-paid jobs - not because of the economic downturn but to gain more flexibility and control over their lives, says Alison Maitland

Sue Delafons quit a senior post in corporate planning at a leading UK company after just two weeks. She knew from the first day that the job was a mistake. But leaving it was terrifying rather than liberating. "It felt like stepping out of an airplane without a parachute at 20,000 feet."

The leap into the unknown seemed all the more dangerous because Ms Delafons had two small children and was recently divorced, so there was no joint breadwinner to cushion the impact. She had no clear destination. But she knew that she no longer wanted to be a strategy consultant or executive earning well over £100,000 but with no time to reflect.

Her CV was very "non-risk". She had been to St Paul's Girls' School, then Cambridge, had worked for Saatchi & Saatchi and had become a consultant. "I had this feeling I wanted something else. I thought it was time I took a risk," she says.

Things turned out well. Finding work was not a problem and to her surprise she made £10,000 in her first month as an independent consultant. She then contacted several charity interests that interested her. Now she holds a portfolio of jobs in the voluntary sector, earns about £35,000 a year and bubbles with enthusiasm at having broken the "relentless logic" of a privileged education and a conventional high-flying career.

The idea of pursuing more than one career in a lifetime is gaining ground - and not just among those who have lost jobs in the downturn. Longer life expectancy and pension funding pressures are expected to force more people to continue working into their 60s and 70s. "However much you love what you're doing, you're going to have to love it an awful lot to go on doing it for four decades," says John McLaren, a novelist, charity trustee and chairman of a corporate finance consultancy, who has previously been a diplomat and an investment banker.

Well-paid professionals in their 30s and 40s are opting out of traditional corporate careers to gain more flexibility and control over their lives, says Dena McCallum, co-managing director of Eden McCallum, a company that matches freelance consultants to projects at large companies. She and co-founder Liann Eden sponsored a recent panel discussion for fellow alumni of Insead business school, at which Ms Delafons, Mr McLaren and others related their experiences.

Eden McCallum has a "talent pool" of about 200 consultants. Some used to work in dotcoms, some have been "downsized" and others have simply had enough of riding the corporate escalator. "Forty-four per cent of our talent pool is single and 66 per cent is male," says Ms McCallum. "These are the people taking major career risks. Seventy-four per cent are aged 30 to 45; they're close to the peak of their earning potential and on fast-track careers. But they're saying: There are other things I want to do with my life."

A recent survey of 1,013 people by Penna Sanders & Sidney, the career consultants, found that 20 per cent would "do something completely different" if they were free to choose. A further 17 per cent would do the same job but in a different sector. However, many people cited money worries, commitments, fear of the unknown or concern that they were too old as reasons for not making a move.

There may be justification for hesitating, beyond the obvious point about job uncertainty in a downturn. The process of "career transition" can be long and painful, according to Herminia Ibarra, professor of business administration at Harvard Business School and a visiting professor at Insead, who has researched the subject.

There is rarely a blinding flash when people realise what they ought to be doing, she says. "Usually there is no epiphany. The clouds are not going to part. Or it may come a lot later, after you've sweated it out and driven everybody nuts. Where you end up isn't necessarily where you thought you were going."

It can take years to move from one career to another. "The bigger changes take longer; and the older you are, the longer it takes. You're figuring out who you want to be now. You have to think about yourself differently and give up some old ideas about who you are, who you should be and what other people thought you ought to be. You have to sell yourself differently."

There are growing numbers of career transition coaches or navigators eager to assist. Some top executives hire personal talent scouts. Impartial outsiders can be helpful but Prof Ibarra warns against anyone who offers a battery of psychological tests as a first step on the road to a new career. "It's an abstract personality profile. It's better to try out something concrete."

That may mean drawing up a business plan, writing a play or carrying out some voluntary work while staying in your job. A career break or executive education programme can also give people a fresh perspective. It is safer to experiment before cutting the financial lifeline.

How do high-earners adjust to a far lower salary or to no regular income at all? "It's much worse thinking about it when you have a stable salary," says Stephen Taylor, a Cambridge graduate who began work in a United Biscuits factory, did an MBA at Stanford, joined McKinsey and then gave it up to become a film producer. "Once you've jumped and seen that there's a way of muddling through, it doesn't seem so bad."

However, he adds frankly: "Having money does make life a lot easier. I wouldn't recommend it unless you really want to do this."

Close friends and family can stand in the way of a career change, says Prof Ibarra. "The people who care about us and know us best have the hardest time imagining us doing something different."

That was the experience of David Hoare, who has been a consultant, venture capitalist and corporate trouble-shooter in his varied career. His father, who had worked for British American Tobacco for 40 years, told him he was "crackers" when he decided to give up a highly paid senior job at Bain & Co, the management consultants. "I'd come from a risk-averse family," he says. "But I thought: 'To hell with it; I've always been told that with risk comes reward.'"

Mr Hoare formed Talisman Management, a private investment group, then became a company doctor to businesses including Laura Ashley. He now chairs several companies, including Virgin Express, the Brussels-based airline controlled by Sir Richard Branson that is keenly eyeing the opportunities offered by the collapse of Sabena, the Belgian national airline.

Mr Hoare is clearly content with his latest career, even if friends think he does not have a "proper job" because he works from home a lot. "The variety is really important - and having greater control. (You can) do more of what you want to do and dump the stuff you don't want to do. Part of it is making sure there's a balance between work and play."

Ms Delafons points to other social benefits. People are interested in her range of jobs and activities, which include writing and public speaking, and are keen to discuss her work than when she was a full-time consultant. "They say to me now: 'What are you doing?' rather than 'What do you do?'"