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BY ALISON LOBRON

THREE YEARS AGO, Dan Ladd of Lincoln closed up a real estate law practice and went back to school. Faced with a slow business climate and a desire for a skill he could take overseas, the former lawyer is now in training to be a veterinary technician.



Dan Ladd left real estate law to become a veterinary technician.

Ladd, 59, is one of thousands of Massachusetts residents who are in the throes, or on the cusp, of a significant career change. More than 3 percent of Bay State workers have lost their jobs since this recession began in December 2007; others are sensing uncertainty in the air and want to re-evaluate their current paths.

But professionals seeking change say they find little in the way of a clear pathway to get there — surprising, given how common the situation is. After all, the average US worker of the Baby Boom generation held 10.8 jobs before age 42. (Not all of those job changes represented career changes, but no one has a better number because the government says there's no consensus on what constitutes a career change.) The stories of Dan Ladd and other successful career changers offer a glimpse at what strategies work and which ones might work.

On the individual level, a satisfactory transition requires experiencing the day-to-day aspects of a profession before spending money on further education; getting to know people outside one's usual network; identifying transferrable skills; and opening oneself up to unheard-of careers.

For policymakers, fostering successful change means thinking more broadly about when, in a person's life, public educational dollars should be invested. Painful as it's been, this recession offers an opportunity for us to recognize the extent to which our current system — in which you pay a lot of money up front for an education, often before you have an idea what you want to do — is poorly suited to an era in which many people will work for 50 years. A good first step, career changers say, would be different financial aid

policies for people with, say, more than 10 years of work experience. Another would be fostering more avenues for people to test-drive different careers without making a significant investment in education. A third may be acknowledging that men and women may approach transition differently, and that, for reasons that are unclear, state resources are now doing a better job reaching women.

There's also a cosmic cultural shift that needs to happen, a greater recognition that (measurable or not) career change is common. We still ask kids what they want to be when they grow up. The question that would better reflect our reality — and the likely future — is, “What do you want to try first?”

COURAGE FROM A SOUR ECONOMY

Ladd, a graduate of Boston University and Suffolk Law School, says he enjoyed practicing law for many years but increasingly craved a career that offered a “little more sense of adventure,” where he might be able to take his skills overseas. “It wasn't a pull so much to the veterinary field as a pull to a field that had different characteristics from law — more physically active, more opportunities to be outdoors, where I could develop a skill that was transferable elsewhere,” says Ladd.

“The idea of being a vet was always interesting to me,” he says. “In the '90s, I thought about it, but didn't quite have the courage.”

Courage came, in part, from a sour economy. Facing the beginnings of a real estate slump in 2006, and inspired by a girlfriend who had gone to nursing school in her 40s, Ladd sought help through Jewish Vocational Services. He knew only that he wanted hands-on work, likely involving animals or some form of landscape design. His counselor urged him to volunteer in as many fields as he found interesting, so he took a position at the Stone Zoo, then later switched to the animal hospital at the Franklin Park Zoo. While volunteering, he learned about veterinary technicians, a field that required less training than becoming a veterinarian would. He started a bachelor's of science program at Mount Ida College in January 2007 and expects to graduate next summer. While Ladd is eyeing work in Massachusetts, he also hopes to bring his animal-care skills overseas, perhaps as a Peace Corps volunteer.

While he says he felt some financial freedom because he does not have children, he still needed loans to supplement his savings, and Ladd found the financial-aid process frustrating because schools treated him, in effect, as though he were 18 years old. “They're really all structured around someone who is in their late teens or early twenties and getting loans based on parental income,” he says. When he applied for loans, he had to show his own past income as an indication of “family income” — even though, unlike the parent of a 19-year-old, he wouldn't have the same salary while he went to school.

To be sure, financial aid is an anxious and uncertain process for students of all ages. But it's also one that assumes that 20-ish is the age for education investment — and the rest

of life is the time when you reap the benefits — when in fact, many need the training later in life.

“That’s why people like me are employed full-time!” jokes Phyllis Stein, a private career counselor in Cambridge. “There isn’t a structure the way there is when you’re in college. But that’s often way before you have enough data and information about yourself” to make a good decision, she says.

Kerin Mayher, 33, invested a lot in a career that turned out to be neither satisfying nor especially stable. A Raynham native who now lives in Medford, she studied psychology and sociology at the University of Massachusetts –Amherst and, as part of her academic program, worked to help prepare prison inmates for release. Through on-the-job training, she got a license to work as a social worker with children in the court system. She quickly assumed she’d make more money doing similar work if she had a law degree, so she went to Suffolk Law School. When she graduated — with \$100,000 in school loans — she found a job climate remarkably different than what she expected, and different than what she felt the school had promised her.

“What I failed to look into before I went to law school was that if you don’t graduate in the top 10 of your class, you don’t get one of those big law firm jobs that pay \$150,000,” says Mayher, who initially took a job in a general practice. “I was working my butt off to make \$45,000.”

In 2005, she got a job working for the state Department of Social Services, where she’d previously been a social worker. “It just wasn’t as fulfilling as I thought it would be. I wasn’t able to effect change like I thought I would,” says Mayher. She remembers feeling envious of the social workers, who earned overtime when she didn’t.

The next few years were a series of stops and starts, and personal challenges. After Mayher’s parents suffered serious injuries in a car accident in 2007, she quit the Social Services job “cold turkey,” she says. While helping her parents recuperate, Mayher managed her father’s residential rental business and then worked as a legal recruiter, where, she says, she learned how many attorneys are unhappy with their work.

“It was a good position for me, but then I got laid off,” she says. “I decided what I really enjoyed was the people contact, and helping professionals decide what they wanted to do. So I did some informational interviewing and joined some legal professional organizations, and gathered all the info I could. I took a temp job at the Northeastern Law School career office and did some career advising.” Mayher is now employed at one of the state’s one-stop career centers — where she tries to focus on ex-lawyers — and hopes to open her own consulting firm helping lawyers get re-trained.

Looking back, she wishes she’d spent more time in law offices. “I knew what a lawyer does, and of course I read tons of John Grisham books and it seemed really exciting,” she says with a laugh. “I did a lot of internships in college, but I never did one at a law firm. I

had no idea what it was really like to be a lawyer and, had I known that, I probably would not have gone down the path I went down. It isn't a good fit for my personality."

SELF-ASSESSMENT IS KEY

Both Mayher and Ladd believe the key to a successful change is to have the chance to try things out, which can be difficult when you're already employed full-time. Indeed, the chance for exploration may be one of the few upsides to a layoff — though not everyone has the financial cushion for experimentation.

Suzanne Bump, state secretary for labor and workforce development, urges laid-off Massachusetts residents to take advantage of the state's 37 "one-stop" career centers. Low-income residents may be eligible for federal vouchers for work-training and for one-on-one counseling. But professionals of all income levels can participate in courses to help them figure out how to transfer skills from one field to another. Bump says the number of workers with some post-secondary education visiting the state career centers swelled in the last year. "There is a tremendous awareness of the need for skills assessment and a greater willingness to sit themselves down in the classroom and make a real investment in their skills capacity," says Bump.

But Bump says the state faces a particular challenge around gender and figuring out how to better serve men. She reports that although this recession has hit male workers harder than female ones, approximately 60 percent of the lower-income people who visit one-stop career centers are women, a statistic that's taken her office by surprise.

"There's a real openness toward self-assessment and mediation on the part of women in the workforce," says Bump. "Once we get out of crisis mode, I want us to really focus on what it is that we can do better to bring more men into the training system."

Chris Leuchtenburg of Acton is a man who did seek help when he was unemployed — though he did so from private counselor Phyllis Stein. Leuchtenburg spent 25 years in the computer industry, working his way up to the position of vice president of business development for a start-up. But when the first dot-com bubble popped in 2001, his job went with it. He spent a year without a job and began seeing Stein. "I'd been thinking of leaving the industry for some time, and this felt like nature's way of telling me the time was right," says Leuchtenburg. "I had a strong interest in music, so I looked at that, but I was also interested in the environment." He also wanted to do more hands-on work, in which he created a product rather than selling someone else's.

On Stein's advice, Leuchtenburg started a process that can strike dread into the heart of anyone who isn't a self-help book author: networking. His mother introduced him to a friend whose son worked for the Nature Conservancy in Connecticut, and that friend recommended he look into GIS. "I said, 'What's GIS?'" Leuchtenburg remembers.

As he learned about Geographic Information Systems, he got interested in the technical aspect of mapping, and began taking courses at UMass–Boston. He now works part-time

for the state's Division of Ecological Restoration and part-time in the city of Cambridge's watershed division, making maps to help determine which rivers need restorations, and which dams could be removed.

While the technical environment is familiar, Leuchtenburg likes doing the hands-on piece rather than managing others. The father of three says his pay cut was significant, but it coincided with his wife's return to paid work after being home with their children. With some lifestyle cutbacks, they were able to afford the change, as well as the course work he needed.

It is difficult to legislate for serendipitous encounters like the conversation that introduced Leuchtenburg to GIS — especially for Bay State residents without much of a financial cushion to figure out their next steps. But Secretary Bump hopes the one-stop centers will provide people with networking opportunities, like the one that worked for Leuchtenburg, as well as emotional support. “A major function of career centers is to allow people to maintain social ties and avoid the isolation and shame that can come from unemployment,” she says.

Leuchtenburg says the combination of networking and career counseling — which helped him expand his sense of possibilities and manage the anxiety of unemployment — worked for him. “During that year, when I didn't know if I would work or when, that was stressful,” he recalls. But having emerged from the other side of the change, he says, “My job satisfaction is fabulous.”