

# WOMEN'S BUSINESS

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## CAREER TRANSITIONS

### Leverage Passion, Expertise for Next Fit

By Erika Alvarez

The inevitable career transition, while potentially difficult, doesn't have to be devastating – far from it, in fact, if the search for the next step is done methodically, with optimism, in tune to personal values and with plenty of patience. Just ask Jane Swift, Teri Cavanagh and business partners Sarah Harris and Beth Miller. All four have successfully moved ahead by leveraging their skills and their passions to their advantage.

"Nobody really cares you're leaving anywhere," says Cavanagh, who's in her fifth career transition. "They just want to know what you're going to do next."

And there's the rub – figuring out and then finding the right fit. Take heart, it can be done.

Today Swift is a partner at Arcadia Partners, Boston, where she's parlaying her successful efforts to improve the state's educational system as Massachusetts acting governor, lieutenant governor and state senator to the venture capital firm that helps fund the for-profit education industry.

Cavanagh, who recently left FleetBoston, where she was senior vice president and director of the Women Entrepreneurs' Connection, is taking the entrepreneurial route by launching TLC Connections in Pocasset. With her new consultancy, she's capitalizing on her experience and expertise to help corporations and nonprofits target and serve women in business.

**Former HR senior execs Harris and Miller worked out their next step together after each lost her job around the same time. After methodically conceptualizing their "dream job," they incorporated GoodDeeds, based in Newton, in November 2003, and now provide personal assistance services to, as they say, "highly competent but overscheduled women."**

All four can now look back at their careers and recount the logical and obvious trajectory that led them to their current roles. But

that clarity went missing for a while as they transitioned into selecting a new direction.

Borrowing from William Bridge's book, "Transitions," Cavanagh refers to this stage as the "neutral zone," that uncomfortable period between the end of one career and the beginning of the next. Transitioning herself from banker to consultant to owner of a small retail business to, until recently, advocate for women entrepreneurs through FleetBoston, she's a pro at handling what can be a troubling gray area.



Sarah Harris and Beth Miller

Many people rush this stage, Cavanagh points out. To maximize the possibility that your next move will be a good one, it's best to spend a good amount of time here, exploring and discovering more about yourself. "You have to be confident to manage your transition at your own pace and in your own way," she says. "That is part of being successful. What most people do is try to get from pain to solution too quickly."

Giving the transition time, Swift agrees, "will help you identify a really good fit that may not have

been immediately apparent. Try to keep from getting too narrow in your focus. Cast a wide net."

Over time, Swift observes, her "priorities became more cohesive." She realized it was important to her to work in an industry or sector she cared about, and education was at the top of that list. Another goal was to have an enjoyable work arrangement that offered her the flexibility she needed as a mother of three, and was also intellectually challenging and stimulating, which she knew would be a tough combination to find. Finally, she wanted to transfer the skills she had built in her 15 years of public service.

Swift says she never would have considered venture capital had it not been for this exploratory phase, when she scheduled the numerous informational interviews that provided her access to "lots of interesting things going on in industry and society that

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even the best-schooled person wouldn't know."

As for the informational interview itself, Swift cautions, "Clearly articulate your goals for the meeting just as you would for any important meeting. You need to exhibit the same level of discipline and focus as you did in your prior job. I would never go to a lunch meeting without doing homework and having specific goals for the meeting."

**Miller and Harris found themselves at loose ends at the same time. They'd met 11 years earlier while working at a human resources consulting firm in Boston and had kept in touch as they went on to leadership roles at different companies. In their most recent corporate roles, Miller was VP of HR contract services at K-Force, running a \$13 million staffing practice until her division was closed. Harris was the VP of HR and a member of the executive team at publicly traded Primix Solutions until it was sold.**

Already friends, the GoodDeeds partners made sure they were aligned on other matters before starting a business together. They agreed on flexibility and commitment to communication with one another, and they developed and signed a partnership agreement.

To find their company focus, they inventoried their interests, their project management skills and their life experiences, and then brainstormed ideas. An executive coaching and career transitioning business, while a seemingly logical next step, felt too safe. GoodDeeds was a fresh approach to applying their expertise and so they were energized by the prospect of a new direction.

Harris put her skills, evident during her career and in the family events she's always planning, to use as the partner in charge of the company's delivery, administration and finance. Miller, a former successful rainmaker, runs GoodDeed's sales and marketing and also leverages the years she enjoyed as an informal personal shopper for friends by overseeing the personal shopping end of the business.

Cavanagh looks at transition as the opportunity to expand upon developing interests. "I now think, forget about transferable skills," she says. Instead she suggests, "Ask, what juices you in the morning? If it's 'I don't know,' that's what you have to work on. What I'm passionate about now is working on women's issues, staying involved with women and money and helping them become successful."

To navigate a transition, Cavanagh recommends setting up a brain trust of people in your life whom you consider to be your champions. It should be a small group of up to six people who help you think through the ideas you have about your opportunities for growth. "Bring other people into the process," she says. "Tell them, 'This is what I'm thinking,' then identify the next steps and hold yourself accountable."

Swift already belonged to a group of highly successful working mothers before her latest transition. Groups such as this can pro-

vide practical advice as well as emotional support, she points out. **Harris and Miller refer to the allies they have created over the years who have become their board of advisors. "People really want to help," Harris says. "If you go to them with confidence and passion but also respect people's time by having a well-thought out business plan, they will help you."**

Pinpointing your passion is the ultimate ingredient in a successful next-step search, all agree.

Swift is bringing forward her public servant's passion for education to the venture capital platform at Arcadia Partners, which invests in companies with unique learning solutions to satisfy the demand for education and training resources. Today, she manages a pool of capital that she uses to identify and invest in education businesses. She is one of three partners who manage the selected businesses through growth to create liquidity for investors. Depending on the situation, Swift might offer strategic guidance, help improve management practices, assist in recruiting, or leverage relationships with other Arcadia portfolio companies. She says she especially enjoys the opportunity to work with companies that are at various stages of development.

**GoodDeeds partners Harris and Miller – specializing in home project management, organizing, personal shopping, event planning, research and resourcing, travel planning, and dedicated personal assistant work – also sell their services to companies as an employee and corporate benefit. Since they've spent their careers in human resources, they're leveraging their contacts with great success and tremendous satisfaction.**

"We're really giving back to people," Harris says, "giving them back their time."

"We've doubled our revenue every month," Miller adds. "How motivating is that?"

With TLC, Cavanagh is helping corporations and nonprofit organizations market to women by creating strategy, providing knowledge about this target group, and leveraging her established international network of policy makers, influencers, decision makers and women business leaders to help clients reach their goals.

TLC's first client is the Center for Women's Business Research, a nonprofit think tank focusing on women entrepreneurs. Cavanagh is helping the organization bring together corporate sponsors such as Office Depot, AT&T and IBM to fund research.

"Taking a risk is critical to any growth and to any success," Cavanagh says. "You have to get to the point where you say, 'Let's just go play Take a Chance.' Each time I made a change I didn't know what it would be like, and each time was more exciting and educational than the time before. I'm excited to see where this will go."

*Erika Alvarez is a Southborough-based management consultant and meeting facilitator who helps senior teams at Fortune 500 companies with brainstorming and creative problem solving sessions.*

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