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Sliding doors: Alternative careers of the best

What could have been for some of our greatest business leaders?

Dean Forbes spent his teens as a professional footballer for Crystal Palace, while

Jordan Watson first signed to Manchester United at the young age of eight. Kim Nilsson earned a PhD in astronomy and worked on the Hubble Telescope. Andy Rogers was in a band that toured Spain and — after he quit — went on to release a triple platinum album.

What they each have in common is a career pivot — all four are now successful business leaders who started out in entirely different fields before finding a new road.

And they aren't alone. Martha Stewart was a model and then a stock broker before shifting to a career in food, Walt Disney was a paper delivery boy before moving into animation, and Vera Wang worked as a journalist

before focusing on wedding dresses. And, Jonah Peretti may not be a household name but, after working as a computer science teacher, he co-founded BuzzFeed and The Huffington Post.

Change is good

"Career changing is possible at any age, but people tend to believe it's harder as they get older," says career coach and consultant Hannah Salton.

"Career changing can be great because, contrary to popular belief, you are not starting from scratch — you are building upon all the skills and experience you've gained so far, just in a new context or environment."

Indeed, Forbes took the professionalism and discipline he learned playing football professionally as a teenager and translated that into a successful

career in business. At 18, he realised he wasn't going to make the cut in the longer term, so on advice from his friend and agent switched into technology, eventually rising up through the ranks to help transform and sell three companies, since stepping in as the president at Access Group.

He sees a great deal of crossover between professional sport and the business world. "There's this perpetual improvement cycle as an athlete... and absolute discipline to get the best out of yourself," he says.

Jordan Watson, CEO of Solis Digital, agrees that such skills are transferable and he believes that playing professionally as a teen gave him the ability to deal with pressure.

"Very few people in the world feel the pressure of having to walk out to thousands of fans who saved up all week to come to a football match," he says.

Perhaps that's why professional athletes have had such success in business, even while still playing. Ten-

nis star Venus Williams has a clothing line and interior design firm, former ice hockey player Wayne Gretzky has a vineyard and restaurant business, and ex boxer George Foreman is famous for his eponymous grills.

Different expectations

Not all previous work translates neatly — the ability to pass a football isn't all that helpful in a corporate office, after all — but don't be afraid to set aside hard work.

Nilsson dreamed of becoming an astronomer since she was 13 years old. "I was looking at the stars twinkling at night out my window, and I wondered why they were doing that," she says.

Armed with a PhD from Copenhagen University, she worked in scientific roles for four years. "But I had this nagging feeling that actually maybe it wasn't right for me. I just didn't enjoy it as much as I expected to," she adds. "...Life's too short to keep working on something when you don't enjoy it."

Realising she loved the project management side of her work, she decided to pivot to business — but she couldn't get a job offer despite dozens of applications.

After years of education to earn her doctorate in astronomy, she headed back to university for an MBA, which helped give her the professional and personal development she needed to start her own business.

That business was data science firm Pivigo, a company that now employs multiple people who also pivoted careers, including a musician-turned-software engineer and a scientist who is now a sales person.

Turning to education is a key way to shift careers — just ask Elizabeth Warren, who retrained as a lawyer after a stint as a teacher.

Managers should keep that in mind, as work shifts to fewer life-long employees and more mid-career pivots.

"The world of work is changing, and managers need to understand that employees don't want a job for life anymore," Salton says.

"They will get more from their staff in the short to mid-term if they support people with their long-term goals and career development."



And that's why flexibility is so important. "You have to genuinely care about and be passionate about what you do," Watson adds.

"It's about getting value from what you do on a daily basis — and if something stops giving you that feeling, then move on."

Part of that is understanding the power of flexibility. Indeed, mentors and managers should keep this focus on flexibility front of mind when it comes to helping employees set career goals.

"I don't believe in rigid five or ten year plans. They can give a false sense of certainty in an uncertain and fast-changing world," says Salton.

"Having a long term vision can be inspiring — knowing at a high level what you want your career to give you, or how you want your career to fit into your life. But deciding rigidly on the specifics can be limiting, and can lead us to miss out on new and emerging opportunities."

Moving forward

It's also important to remember that change isn't failure. Setting aside old dreams may simply be a case of recognising what you really want out of life. Andy Rogers knows this better than anyone.

After touring with a band, he quit the rock star life in order to focus on his other love: technology. "It was a massive decision for me, a personal crossroads," he says.

Rogers has since found further success with his own company, software developer Amdaris. Amdaris

employs more than 250 people and is looking to turn over \$10 million this year, while Rogers' former bandmates went on to form a new group called The Hoosiers, whose album went triple platinum in 2007.

"You sort of question yourself, but it was their reality, their future — it wasn't mine," Rogers says. "I'm not a regret sort of person... and I didn't see it as quitting the band so much as embracing a future that was right for me."

Rogers is not the only creative who has turned his attention to business: Jay-Z has produced films, runs a clothing line, and sports bars, and Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle brand Goop is worth \$250 million, while Rhianna's fashion and makeup empire Fenty is estimated to be worth \$3 billion.

It's fair to say that most career changes aren't as dramatic as the decision made by Rogers, though. Many end up as a series of smaller steps that lead to a new path. "The key is small, consistent steps forward, and being comfortable with ambiguity," Salton comments.

"Some people know what they want to do before contemplating a career change, but for the vast majority, it's stepping in to the unknown, and working it out as you go along."

Ultimately, remaining open and flexible to change are good characteristics that are as useful in our personal lives as they are in business.

Perhaps Rogers sums it up best when he says: "One of the things I've realised in life is that you can't be sure of anything."