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Going back to school can pay off

But the decision has to be made with great care.

By Marjo Cusipag
Free Press Reporter

After twelve years of working in credit-related positions, Barbara England decided to do something about the void. "It just wasn't satisfying on a personal level," she explains. Of her last five years as a litigation officer for Canada Trust's Mastercard, England says: "It wasn't bad, but it wasn't for me."

Resolved to find a career that would, in her own words, provide personal growth, England quit her job at Canada Trust and took off for a five-month trip to Europe.

When she came back, after going for career counselling, she found herself in school — full-time, for one year. It was a move that placed her in the ranks of thousands of Canadians who have returned to school after being employed full-time for several years.

According to Statistics Canada, 92,000 Canadians aged 25 to 44 left the labor force last year — voluntarily or otherwise — and went back to school. This figure, which has been growing steadily during the last five years, represents a 35-per-cent increase from 1990.

"The recession changed the labor market," says Darlene Labadie, an education and training plan co-ordinator at Womanpower Inc., where England went for counselling.

"People who had been working for 15, 20 years suddenly found themselves without a job. And those who weren't laid off found they couldn't do their jobs the way they used to."

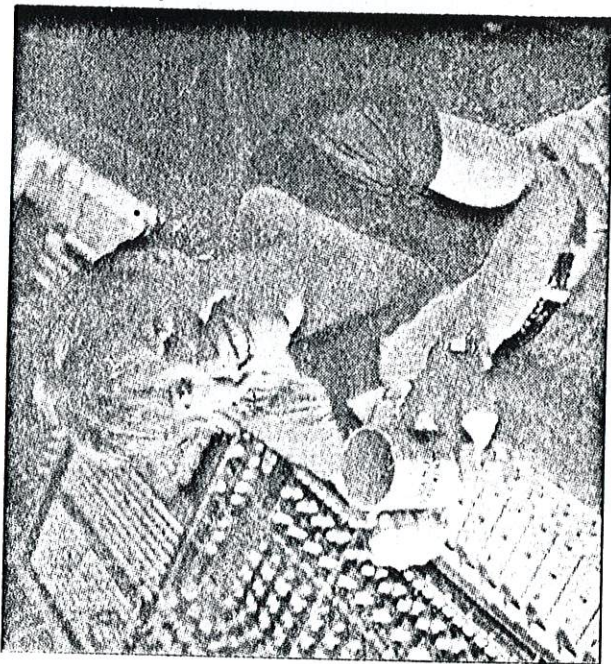
Sometimes, in such situations, revisiting the classroom can provide the solution, or at least part of it. But it's an idea not always met with the least resistance.

"So few people will make that conscious decision," says Jonathan Creaghan, a London-based career counsellor whose programs are tailored for the "new economy."

"It's mostly the reaction to the economy that's driving people to school."

In England's case, it was the feeling of stagnation that forced her to take a gamble on schooling. And it's a gamble that has paid off.

Four years after obtaining a diploma in audio engineering from the Ontario Institute of Audio Recording Technology in London, England now manages SoundWorks, a recording studio owned by the school, and teaches music business.



SUSAN BRADNAM/The London Free Press

Barbara England went back to school to retrain — and is now manager at SoundWorks recording studio.

"I can't believe I'm doing this — I'm blown away," she says.

But getting to where she is today was no easy task. England says it took a leap of faith — in herself — and a lot of hard work.

Perhaps the hardest part, career counsellors will tell you, is deciding what area of study to undertake.

GENERAL PROGRAM: For those who, for whatever reason, simply cannot decide on a specific area, Donna Moore, a mature student adviser at the University of Western Ontario, suggests enrolling first in a general program. "And from there, see what courses you find the most interesting and that you do well in," she says.

But that should be Plan B, resorted to only after all the homework and hours of honest self-assessment have been

done.

To begin, Moore and Labadie suggest asking yourself the following questions:

- ▶ What are you interested in?
- ▶ What are your skills and abilities? Look at untapped aptitudes.

▶ Analyze your values and work philosophy.

"Are you someone who likes to work independently, or do you enjoy working within a team?" Labadie reels off examples of ethics-related questions. "Do you prefer a flexible work environment? Are monetary rewards of primary importance to you?"

▶ How will you support yourself financially?

▶ Examine the life stage you're at and determine needs and barriers.

"Are there other responsibilities — do you have youngsters or teens or a spouse, and are they on-side?"

"How will you help them cope with this change?"

▶ Is it worth the investment?

Labadie explains this crucial question: "Look at the number of working years you have left and determine, after deducting the years you'll spend in school, will the remaining years provide a return on my investment?"

"By doing this, you can decide whether you want to spend four years in school, or maybe just one or two."

After assessing yourself, the next step should be to examine the industry, or industries, you have chosen.

"Research, research, research," Creaghan stresses.

Creaghan says finding out as much as you can about the industry is vital.

"Research the market," he says. "Read as much as you can about it, talk to people in the field and look at the industry in general."

The following questions, Creaghan says, should be answered:

- ▶ Is there long-term growth in the industry? If so, is there long-term growth in your geographical area, or will you have to relocate?

▶ Can the industry support the number of graduates coming out of schools each year?

▶ What kind of salary will you be looking at?

▶ What kind of lifestyle changes will you have to make?

"Most people build their lives around a pay cheque," says Creaghan. "Going back to school is a big investment and therefore a big risk."

"Be prepared."