



A conversation with Lucy Kellaway

KPMG Board Leadership Centre



As working lives gets longer, many of us may contemplate reskilling into a new career or direction, particularly in later years. But how do you go about it and what are the challenges – and rewards – it can bring? Lucy Kellaway, former FT journalist, author and FTSE100 non-executive director, joined our Board Leadership Centre FTSE350 meeting to share her experiences of transitioning into a new teaching career.

The days of working for just one or two organisations in a career that ends neatly at 60 or 65 are receding. More of us face the reality of needing to work longer – while career longevity with a single employer is becoming rarer too.

In such circumstances, the possibility of reskilling and finding a new direction is becoming increasingly attractive to many. It also holds potential benefits for businesses, who can tap into new reservoirs of mature talent seasoned with plenty of experience and nous.

But it is certainly not easy to do. How should you go about it – and what are the challenges and opportunities you should have your eyes open to?

The BLC was privileged to hear from one person who has managed all this and set herself on an exhilarating new path. Lucy Kellaway worked for the Financial Times for over 30 years and became famed for her sharp and satirical commentaries on the follies of corporate life. But in 2017, aged 57, she gave it all up. Setting her sights on a career in the classroom, she went the whole mile and co-founded an enterprise called Now Teach which helps individuals switch careers into teaching.

Alongside this, Lucy now teaches herself at a tough – but disciplined – inner-city secondary school in London.

The search for usefulness

Reflecting back on her decision, it seems that a change in outlook and values was perhaps Lucy's chief motivator. "I had the nicest job at the FT that really anyone could have," she said. "Sending up some of the silly things that happen in the corporate world was the gift that kept on giving! I loved what I did and loved my colleagues. But after my father died – my mother having already died before him – and with my kids growing up, I suddenly asked myself 'am I going to do this forever?' I had more or less done just one thing – journalism – for my whole career, alongside nine years as a non-executive director at Admiral PLC."

Lucy realised that her motivation had changed. "When I was young, I wanted to earn a reasonable living and do something glamorous. Now, I wanted to do something *useful*. That was at the heart of the change."

Teaching appealed in part because Lucy's mother had been a teacher, and her daughter had embarked on a teaching career too through the social enterprise Teach First.

"I watched my daughter and realised that she had been more useful in her first term than I had been – in a way – during my nearly 40 year career!" Lucy reflected.

But looking around at opportunities, it felt like entry into the profession was very much geared to the young. So, not being deterred by this Lucy set up her own way in! Announcing her intention to move into teaching in one of her FT columns, she invited like-minded individuals to join her – and had about 1,000 responses, nearly crashing the FT server. The upshot was the co-founding, with Katie Waldegrave, of Now Teach with a first year intake of 45 career-changing professionals mainly from the classic FT-reading city professions: bankers, corporate lawyers, accountants, derivative traders and their ilk.

For Lucy, this meant being immersed in at the deep end in front of classrooms of thirty two teenagers. But how did it actually go?

A vertical learning curve

Lucy likened her first steps into her new career to taking up an extreme sport. "In a way, I had wanted my fear back as that's always been a motivator – and boy, did I get it in spades! I should have been careful what I wished for. In the early days, I was waking up at 1am – only just after I'd fallen asleep! – rigid with anxiety. But, the brilliant thing was: the learning curve was vertical! Whether you make a massive change or a smaller change, you'll definitely be learning." Lucy advocates that learning new skills has been really positive for her

and has helped her to regain a feeling of youthful energy. “I may not have loved every minute of it, but it’s been a bit like being *in love* – a kind of heightened state. I wanted a new challenge and I wanted to be useful. I’ve had that and more, and have absolutely no regrets at all.”

Lucy humorously recounted the observation of her first lesson by a mentor. With two columns for feedback notes – WWW (what went well) and EBI (even better if) – there was just one comment under WWW and a whole page of EBI. But she’s come a long way since then, with the learning curve flattening considerably even if, as she says, “it is nowhere near a plateau.”

New skills and old

In an enthralling and engaging session, there was a continuous flow of questions from attendees. One guest asked what skills from Lucy’s ‘old world’ had helped her in her new one. Lucy reflected that in fact most of the skills she thought would help her, hadn’t. For example, her writing and communication ability hadn’t helped as much as expected because communication in a classroom is very different. Her other trusty weapon – sarcasm – was off bounds because that’s not an appropriate tool when teaching young people. Her conclusion? “You have to *unlearn* lots of things, your rigidity and your redundant old skills.”

What in fact she realised *was* a truly valuable skill was – her age. She described being older as a skill in itself. “It’s really helpful because it gives you perspective. It’s something I’ve been able to draw on to help my young colleagues manage their workloads, know what they should and shouldn’t worry about or put up with – I’m like an informal shop steward sometimes!”

Truly embracing diversity

The usefulness of age and experience, Lucy said, is something that corporates need to leverage much more. Asked whether corporates should be recruiting more older talent, Lucy argued that most organisations don’t value older individuals at all.

Speaking about the traditional career path of individuals joining a company fresh from school or higher education, Lucy spoke of the way that this can encourage the moulding of individuals to a certain type. “Corporates espouse diversity but often they shape everyone into the same thing. We need more embracing of *real* diversity, including older professionals. One of the things I’ve really learned through my teaching experience so far is just how valuable it is to be different.”

There also needs to be more focus on ensuring employees have the opportunity to move around within the organisation into different roles, so that they learn new skills and keep facing fresh challenges. This doesn’t only benefit individuals but organisations too: “What you lose in experience, you get back quickly in enthusiasm,” Lucy observed.

Long COVID-19?

All in all, Lucy’s move has clearly energised, invigorated and inspired her. Nevertheless, there are some significant worries. She is concerned that the syllabus is so focused on the attainment of grades rather than teaching a love of a subject in and for itself, and said of the education system that “we’ve lost the spark and need to get it back.”

She is also worried about the longer-term effects of COVID-19 and recalls that the heightened excitement of students returning to school last September has certainly not been replicated during the most recent return to the classroom in March. Whilst Lucy noted that it’s too early to tell how long it will take to unwind, there will be students who not only haven’t learned anything new during lockdown, but will have forgotten much of what they did know before too.

But despite all the concerns and pressures around the edges, Lucy remains emphatic about the benefits out there for those willing to take the plunge and reskill themselves into something new.

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