

By Thomas Gernon

A sabbatical reboot

“Why have I traded my private office for a desk in a shared room?” I wondered. “Will I get any work done?” It was my first day at my new co-working space on the outskirts of town, 10 kilometers from my university. “I’m here on sabbatical,” I announced to my new officemates. They were directors of tech startups, unaccustomed to mingling with geoscientists like me. I desperately needed some breathing space away from the pressures of university life, but I wasn’t totally convinced it would work out. I needn’t have worried. The co-working space turned out to be the perfect environment for rebooting my flailing research career.

Before my sabbatical, I was on the verge of leaving academia. Six years into an assistant professorship, I felt trapped in my narrow specialty: the science of how volcanic eruptions unearth diamonds. My work had been well funded by the diamond industry when I was a grad student and postdoc. But during my first year as a professor, the 2008 financial crisis hit. Diamond sales plummeted and funding dried up. I tried to pivot by proposing projects that made use of my lab skills in other research areas, such as fluid mechanics. But those proposals were rejected, too. After a productive Ph.D., I wondered, “Did I peak too soon?”

My publication record as a faculty member was soon among the worst in my department. I wasn’t worried about being denied tenure and losing my job because my university doesn’t have a tenure system. But without a vibrant research career, I became increasingly restless. Something big had to change. Then I got thrown a lifeline: My university approved my request for a semester-long sabbatical, which would give me the mental space to think carefully about how to move forward.

At first, I found the hustle and bustle of the co-working space—an open-plan office I shared with eight other people—disruptive. I also missed having geoscientists around to bounce ideas off. Very soon, though, I settled in. I bought noise canceling headphones so I could focus when I needed to. And I found the fast-moving, entrepreneurial environment exhilarating. My co-workers were curious about the problems I was addressing, and I was inspired by the way they welcomed risk taking and outside-the-box thinking.

During a chat over coffee, one of my new officemates told me he’d owned a successful business but lost everything overnight when his company went bankrupt. Afterward, he



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picked himself up and started over. Now, he was the director of another successful company selling a completely different product. His positive attitude about the experience made me realize it’s OK if you hit a dead end—you just shift gears and move in a new direction.

So I took a gamble, deciding that I would use my sabbatical to change research direction. I figured I had nothing to lose. Instead of writing grants to support my new interest—a strategy that hadn’t worked in the past—I decided to write a conceptual paper, hoping to gain credibility in the new field.

The topic I zeroed in on—glacial events that covered all of Earth—had captured my imagination when I was an undergraduate student. But I hadn’t read much about it since then, so I spent a lot of time

catching up on the literature. Then, I formulated an idea about how mass glacial events might have transformed the oceans, and I outlined it in a paper.

Against all odds, the paper was accepted by a top disciplinary journal. After it was published, I received something I wasn’t accustomed to: an invitation to present the idea at a major international conference. There, I met the scientist who pioneered the theory I’d written about, which stimulated collaborations that catapulted me into new areas of science. That was 5 years ago, and I’ve been much more productive and satisfied with my job ever since.

As academic researchers, we’re often funneled into increasingly narrow areas of specialization as we progress in our careers—but that doesn’t mean we’re trapped. Business moguls reinvent their careers all the time. Academics can, too. ■

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