SoftEd

CAREERPRO SERIES

Reframing What You Look For

Your skills travel further than your title.

> Two blind spots stall most searches: people do not see their transferable skills, and they do not see the adjacent industries that buy them. This guide widens the lens on both — the box, the inventory, the adjacency map, and the ground you stand on.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

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The arc is simple: name the box, inventory what travels, map the adjacencies, pick a door, check the ground, and write it all down. Read it straight through once, then work the audits with a pen — and get a second set of eyes on your answers, because nobody sees their own box clearly.

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THE THESIS

Your last job title is not your identity. It is **one container your skills happened to fill**. Search by skills and the market widens. Search by title and it shrinks to whoever posted that exact phrase this week.

BEFORE SECTION ONE

Your Career Is Already Mobile

Someday somebody is going to shake sense into all of us: you cannot go to college and expect one job for life. In a VUCA world — volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity — your career will pivot whether you plan it or not. The reframe just makes the moves deliberate.

Mobility is the norm, not the exception

12.9
jobs held on average between ages 18 and 58

3.9yrs
median time with a current employer, and falling

~27%
of graduates work in a job closely related to their major

You will move again. The only question is whether you move inside a shrinking box or across a wider map. Sometimes a step backward buys three steps up later. This is your career's product strategy, and mobility is one of its inputs.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, NLSY79 and Employee Tenure reports; Abel & Deitz, Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

The research: skills are more portable than you think

This is not motivational talk. Labor economists studying what workers actually do — the tasks, not the titles — found that skills are **more portable than previously considered**. Workers routinely move to occupations with similar task requirements, and task-specific human capital they carry across accounts for up to half of overall wage growth. The task is the asset. The occupation is the container. The market has been paying for transferable skills all along; the reframe is learning to sell them on purpose.

Source: Gathmann & Schönberg, Journal of Labor Economics (2010).

Why the narrow search fails

Same title only
Title-only searches hide roles built on your skills.

Same industry only
A struggling sector drags every resume in it down.

Maximum competition
The obvious box is where every candidate looks.

Identity gets stuck
You become your last title instead of your skills.

Recruiters reinforce the box, and it is not malice: they are paid by the company, and the company wants perfect matches. Same title, same industry, same experience — back in the box you go. If everyone searches the same box, who wins? The candidate who searches where others do not look. Call it the blue ocean of your own career: find the open space that has value and room to maneuver.

WHO YOU ARE VS. WHAT YOU DO

Who you are — your skills, judgment, values — is the foundation. **What you do will change** throughout your career, pivoting on the economic return you want for that foundation. This model works best through networking and referrals, because referrals hire you for who you are, not just what you did last.

SECTION 1 OF 6

The Box You Search In

Nobody handed you the box. You built it — which means you can take it down.

The first move in a stuck search is not more applications. It is a wider definition of what you sell. To widen it, you first have to see the box you built.

Why the box exists

Two reasons. First, **identity glues itself to the title**. Years of introducing yourself by title make the title feel like the skill. It is not; it is packaging. Second, **familiar feels lower risk**. The known box feels safe. But a shrinking, crowded box is the riskier place to stand, and staying in it costs you every role your skills could fill that your title never will.

The three walls

The title wall

You search the words on your last business card and nothing else.

The industry wall

You stay in one sector out of habit, not fit.

The company wall

You only consider employers shaped like your last one: same size, same model, same work.

Quick test: write down your exact last job title. Now look at your search history. If every search contains those words, you have found wall number one, and it is sitting right in front of you.

The boiling frog

Getting laid off is the pot boiling over: painful, but you jump. The boiling frog is worse. You stay in a title and industry that get slowly, steadily worse until there is nowhere left to stand. A talented CMO rode a specific marketing skill set while the marketing world changed underneath him; when disruption finally came, there was no way back in, and the retooling took years. The goal of this guide is to make your retooling take months, not years: mix and match the skills, refresh the language, update the profile, and start responding while you still have runway.

> *Learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable. It is genuinely hard to fully relax in today's market, and that is not a personal failing — it is the operating condition. Always be growing, adjusting, and connecting. And keep doing it after you land, because the next move is easiest to set up while you are employed.*

What staying inside costs you

Every month inside a shrinking box costs you compounding options: the adjacent roles you never applied for, the network you never built in healthier industries, the vocabulary you never learned. The box does not send an invoice. It just quietly narrows what you can say yes to when the disruption arrives.

SECTION 2 OF 6

Your Transferable Skills

Break your work into parts, and most of it is portable.

Everyone talks about transferable skills. Few people categorize them, which is why few people can sell them. Sort your work into four buckets.

The four buckets

Craft skills

The technical work itself. Under every knowledge job is a craft: writer, analyst, accountant, product manager. The craft transfers across roles and industries.

Process skills

Planning, analysis, delivery — often certifiable: Lean, Six Sigma, Agile, sales processes. Know which processes are hot now, and certify what you already do.

People skills

Selling, teaching, negotiating, influencing. Worthless as adjectives, valuable as evidence — quantify them.

Domain knowledge

How your industry really works. The most underrated bucket, and the engine of the adjacency map.

Quantifying people skills is the trick most people miss. "I have emotional intelligence" sells nothing. "I ran this negotiation, this way, with this result" sells. "I influenced three outcomes in a matrix with no positional power" sells. "I trained my replacement, who now does three things I could not" proves you can teach. Connect each people skill to a story with an outcome, then connect the story to the industry you are talking to.

Two piles: what stays, what travels

PORTABLE: GOES WITH YOU

- Skills, methods, judgment, and your track record
- The ability to ferret truth from fiction and make strong decisions
- "I can scope, plan, and land complex work" is true in any industry
- **The portable pile is your product. Sell that.**

ANCHORED: STAYS BEHIND

- Systems specific to one employer, however expert you were
- Politics and internal relationships — the "layer eight" you mastered
- Jargon nobody else uses
- Real value where you are. Worth little on the open market.

YOUR 60-SECOND SKILLS AUDIT

1. Name three things you do well that are not in your job title. Those three travel further than the title does.

2. Which skill do people outside your team come to you for? Outside demand is the first sign a skill travels.

Get help sorting. We all suffer from confirmation bias about ourselves — the well-documented tendency to seek evidence for what we already believe. A coach, mentor, or honest peer sees your buckets more clearly than you do. AI can help too: talk about your work into a transcription tool, feed the transcript to an assistant, and ask it where else those skills are used and bought. Brainstorming partners break boxes.

Source on confirmation bias: Nickerson, Review of General Psychology (1998).

SECTION 3 OF 6

The Adjacency Map

Every profession is surrounded by businesses that serve it.

This is the heart of the reframe. No output happens alone anymore. A car is parts, shipping, assembly, rail, dealer, mechanic — anyone with a role anywhere in cars just heard a list of places they could work, and your profession has the same map.

THE MENTAL MODEL

Your market = your craft + its ecosystem. Two ways to work inside one profession: **do the work**, or **serve the work** — join the companies that sell to it, build for it, and teach it.

The lawyer walkthrough

DOOR	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	ON THE GROUND
Teach it	Law classes, CLE courses, corporate training — and beyond law: contracts, business law.	*Adjunct or curriculum builder in legal education.*
Build it	Product roles at companies making legal software, including the AI wave.	*BA or product manager at a legal tech company — a user on the team.*
Sell it	Revenue roles for products aimed at law offices; you speak the customer's language.	*Sales or sales engineering for legal software, data, or AI services.*
Market it	Marketing for law firms or legal products — a huge spend category.	*Content and campaigns a lawyer can write credibly.*
Write about it	Legal publications, analysis, thought leadership.	*Articles for legal online magazines.*

The four adjacency questions

Point four questions at your own profession and write the answers down: **Who sells to it?** Software and services aimed at your profession. **Who builds for it?** Companies that need your expertise to shape the product. **Who teaches it?** Schools, training firms, and certification bodies. **Who tells its story?** Publications and content teams that need insiders.

A lawyer does business-analysis and project work all day long: categorize it, and certify it if the role needs it. The map runs on **domain knowledge first and craft second** — the firm building legal software wants the lawyer on the team as a user, the way a fintech wants the banker who became a BA.

New eyes are an asset; sell to buyers who see it. Outsiders see the holes that veterans' confirmation bias hides, and some managers recruit for exactly that. Others never will — and with them **you are not going to win. Accept the loss fast** and find the buyers who see beyond the box. Referrals introduce you for who you are.

SECTION 4 OF 6

Doors That Don't Need a Job Opening

You do not need a W-2 to start selling your craft.

The adjacency map shows where to go. These are the doors that open before anyone posts a job.

The consulting & fractional door

An easy yes for the buyer

A scoped engagement costs less and risks less than a hire.

Fractional fits real needs

Many firms need your expertise ten hours a week, not forty.

Entry point, not endpoint

Prove value inside and you are first in line for what opens.

Getting the first client: start with the closest ring of people you have worked with, and look for the proving managers among them. You are not pitching yourself as a life coach; you are offering to **augment**: "I'm doing fractional work now. Does your manager need support?" Your experience opens the door — "I know this industry, get me in the door partially, and you can get value from me." Fractional regularly leads to the job.

It is also a Plan B and a runway extender. One real version: a $200 filing with the Secretary of State in 2016, a first invoice that year, and invoice number 579 sent while still holding a W-2 the whole way through — protection built years before it was needed, using craft and domain knowledge, while staying clear of any W-2 non-disclosure and non-compete obligations. And skip the word "entrepreneur" — "president of my own company" can be a turn-off to employers. **"Fractional professional"** is the label gaining steam, and it reads as exactly what it is.

The pro bono door

Want into a new industry with no track record in it? Find its trade associations and volunteer — ideally onto a board. The connection and the visible contribution build credibility you cannot buy. Moving from law to business analysis? Join the IIBA. Moving toward e-commerce? Join the retail federation. The association is where the industry's language, people, and openings all live in one room.

Same skills, new language

Translate the vocabulary

Rewrite your experience in their words, not yours.

Keep craft, change container

The expertise stays. Only the setting changes.

Expect a ramp, not a rebuild

The differences are real and workable. Weeks, not years.

Adjacent roles want your expertise; they just call it something different. Do not expect a perfect pop-and-fit on day one. Learn the vocabulary, and let the trade association accelerate the learning. The research on weak ties applies squarely here: large-scale experiments show your moderately weak connections — acquaintances outside your closest circle — drive the most job mobility, which is exactly the network a new industry's association hands you.

Source: Rajkumar, Saint-Jacques, Bojinov, Brynjolfsson & Aral, Science (2022).

SECTION 5 OF 6

The Industry Health Lens

Loving your role does not mean staying on sinking ground.

The second blind spot: you are not the industry you work in. You have a skill set that can move to healthier ground — and the earlier you read the ground, the cheaper the move.

Read the ground you stand on

HEALTHY GROUND

- **Hiring broadly.** Competitors across the sector are adding roles.
- **Capital flowing.** Investment and expansion, not just cost cuts. Watch the investment flow above all.
- **Demand rising.** Customers are buying more, not less.

WARNING SIGNS

- **Sector layoffs.** Cuts at rivals too — it is not just your firm.
- **Consolidation.** Mergers made to survive, not to grow.
- **Shrinking demand.** The constant fight to make the numbers means the market itself is getting smaller.

Calibrate honestly: every Fortune 500 trims a few percent in a normal year. One company's layoff is weather. A **sector's** layoffs are climate. And sometimes the honest read hurts: if your industry is decimated, you can love it, stay for the right reasons, and still plan your exits with open eyes. Loving the work and reading the ground are not in conflict; they are the same discipline.

Some crafts travel almost anywhere

Sales is the extreme case: a craft with near-total transferability across B2B and B2C, industry after industry. "I'm only a med-tech salesperson" is the box talking — you are a salesperson whose current container is med-tech. Most crafts are more portable than their owners believe; sales just proves the ceiling.

Putting it together: one reframe

Scenario: a project manager who loves the work, in a struggling paper company. The role is not the problem. The sector is.

MOVE	WHAT HAPPENS
1 **Diagnose**	Name it plainly: the skills transfer, the sector is sinking. This is a ground problem, not a role problem.
2 **Inventory**	List the portable skills: scoping, planning, delivery, stakeholder management.
3 **Target**	"Which industries are growing and hire project managers? I start my search there."
4 **Translate**	Learn the sector's language. Read its companies. The differences can be worked through.
5 **Move**	Network into the healthy industry through its associations and referrals. Same craft, better ground.

This is the emotional core for anyone in a struggling industry: **you do not have to give up the work you love**. You have to move where it is valued.

SECTION 6 OF 6

Document It

A reframe you do not write down evaporates.

Everything above is insight. Insight evaporates. The skills inventory is the artifact you keep, and keeping it alive is the monthly service charge on a multi-million-dollar career asset.

Build the inventory in five steps

STEP	NAME	WHAT HAPPENS HERE
Step 1	**List**	Every skill, sorted into the four buckets: craft, process, people, domain.
Step 2	**Evidence**	An outcome or story behind each one. No adjectives without proof.
Step 3	**Map**	Where else each skill is used and bought — your adjacency answers live here.
Step 4	**Rate**	How portable is it? How current is it? Experience depreciates unless you update it.
Step 5	**Refresh**	A living document, updated quarterly. That cadence is what makes it career insurance.

Hate writing? Talk. Put a transcription tool on your phone, talk through your work, and turn the transcript into inventory entries. Track your contacts too — a spreadsheet beats memory, and LinkedIn is not a CRM: it cannot log what you said, when you met, or what comes next. The biggest regret veterans report is the contact database they never kept.

Working with AI, without the trash

Two modes. **Grounded mode:** give the AI your material — resume, inventory, this guide's frameworks — and have it work against that: cover letters, adjacency brainstorms, skill mappings. **Open mode:** when it searches the wide world, put it in a box. Tell it which sources to use and which to skip, insist on quality sites and peer-reviewed content, and explicitly rule out low-quality forums and crowd-edited sources — and ask it to tell it to you straight. Directed well, AI is the best brainstorming partner a reframe ever had, from naming hot processes worth certifying to mapping your ecosystem.

Rewire the habit, not just the resume

We are pattern builders: same route to work, same lunch, same introductions. Reframing a career means building new neural pathways, and the neuroscience says adult brains do this measurably: learning a genuinely new skill produces observable changes in brain structure, and sustained complex practice reshapes the regions that support it. The mechanism only runs if you force novelty — new skills, new rooms, new industries, even small pattern breaks in the daily routine. Unlearning the old container is as much of the work as learning the new one; experience is a depreciating asset in VUCA unless you keep renewing it. Craft and people skills hold their value best. The technical layer is what demands the maintenance.

Sources: Draganski et al., Nature (2004); Maguire et al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (2000). Session-recommended reading: Barry O'Reilly, Unlearn (2018).

THE PART YOU DO WITH A PEN

Making It Stick

One more research note before the pen comes out: a meta-analysis across tens of thousands of workers found that career adaptability — the readiness to explore, plan, and adjust — consistently relates to employability, career satisfaction, and performance. Adaptability is not a personality trait you either have or lack. It is a practice, and this page is the practice.

Source: Rudolph, Lavigne & Zacher, Journal of Vocational Behavior (2017).

START · STOP · CONTINUE

START — one adjacent search you will run this week

Pick one adjacency question, answer it for your profession, and search those companies.

STOP — searching your last job title only

Name the exact title-only search you will retire.

CONTINUE — the craft you love. Just widen where it lives.

This week's work

- **Run the 60-second audit** and start the five-step inventory: list, evidence, map, rate, refresh. Get a second set of eyes on the buckets — coach, mentor, or honest peer.
- **Build your adjacency map.** Answer the four questions for your profession in writing: who sells to it, builds for it, teaches it, tells its story.
- **Check the ground.** Score your industry against the health signals. If the warning column wins, pick one healthy industry and join its trade association this month.
- **Start the contact database.** A simple spreadsheet: who, when, what was said, next step. Keep it for the rest of your career.

AND WHEN YOU LAND

Keep running the engine. The inventory, the map, the associations, the database — they are cheapest to maintain **while you are employed**, and they are exactly what makes the next disruption a pivot instead of a crisis.

SOURCES

References & Further Reading

Claims in this guide that go beyond the session material rest on peer-reviewed research and government data. Full citations below.

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How the research maps to the method

CLAIM IN THIS GUIDE	SUPPORT
Workers move between occupations with similar tasks; skills are more portable than previously considered, and portable task capital drives up to half of wage growth	Gathmann & Schönberg (2010)
Roughly thirteen jobs per working life; median tenure under four years; ~27% of graduates work closely within their major	BLS NLSY79 & Tenure reports; Abel & Deitz (FRBNY)
We seek evidence that confirms what we already believe about ourselves	Nickerson (1998)
Moderately weak ties drive the most job mobility	Rajkumar et al. (2022)
Learning genuinely new skills produces measurable structural brain change in adults	Draganski et al. (2004); Maguire et al. (2000)
Career adaptability relates to employability, satisfaction, and performance	Rudolph, Lavigne & Zacher (2017)

This guide is developed from the SoftEd CareerPro session "Reframing What You Look For in Your Search," facilitated by David Mantica. Session frameworks: the three walls of the box, the four transferable-skill buckets, the adjacency map and four adjacency questions, the industry health lens, and the five-step skills inventory. Barry O'Reilly's Unlearn is session-recommended reading, listed separately from the peer-reviewed sources above.

SoftEd

Your skills were never the problem. The box was.

Sort what travels into its four buckets. Map the ecosystem around your craft. Walk through the doors that don't need a job opening. Read the ground you stand on, move the work you love to where it is valued — and write it all down, because a reframe you do not document evaporates.

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