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A woman with blonde hair, wearing a bright red sleeveless dress, is climbing a large, rustic wooden jungle gym structure. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall with shadows cast by the structure.

# IT'S A JUNGLE (GYM) *out there*

THERE'S NO STRAIGHT PATH TO THE TOP. HERE'S WHY THINKING OF YOUR CAREER AS A JUNGLE GYM, RATHER THAN A CORPORATE LADDER, IS BENEFICIAL

*By Erin Coe*

**C**limbing the corporate ladder is a concept those of us in the working world are all familiar with: join a company, work hard, pay your dues, keep climbing until you reach the top. Pretty straightforward, right?

Well, not to Facebook COO and *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* author Sheryl Sandberg. She believes the corporate ladder metaphor is old news: 'Ladders are limiting... There's only one way to get to the top of a ladder, but there are many ways to get to the top of a jungle gym'.

And so the idea of the jungle gym was born. And playing on it means trying out new paths and exploring various possibilities on the journey to the top, which may involve climbing up, down, sideways, or even getting off – the exact opposite of the ladder.

Climbing from rung to rung may seem logical, but in today's ever-changing business landscape, it simply isn't an option anymore. Joburg-based career coach Penny Holburn agrees. 'We no longer live in a world where people expect to have a job in one company for life. These days,

departments get cut, retrenchment is common and layers of jobs are disappearing. On the other side of the spectrum, new jobs that never existed before come into being each decade.'

It's because of this changing world that the idea of planning a career from day one may be, at best, tricky and, at worst, detrimental. After all, what are you meant to do if the career you so diligently planned and the ladder you so carefully climbed leads to a job that then gets cut from the company? Penny explains it simply: 'You're limiting your experience and skills if you simply move up one specialised ladder within the confinement of one field.'

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### THE CHANGE-YOUR-CAREER to-do list

If you're tired of the ladder and want to change careers, here are career coach Penny Holburn's top tips:

**Change for the right reasons.** Not liking your company, your boss or your colleagues is not a reason to change your career. Go into a new field because you genuinely want to be in it. Make sure that the new path you want to embark on is really and truly the right one for you.

**Speak to people.** Before selecting a new career for yourself, check it out. Spend time talking to – and if you can – working with people in a similar position. You may find the idea you have of a certain job is different to its reality.

**Do research.** Find out the experience, qualifications and training required. Look at what you need and how to get it.

**Have a plan.** It's a good idea to strategise how you'll implement the skills you already have in your new job. Don't just expect it to work; do the work needed in order to succeed in your new career.

#### MOVING SIDWAYS

This is something 29-year old Sonja Myburg, has done for the past 11 years. 'I have had 18 jobs in that time, including being an event manager, model coordinator and brand ambassador.' And not only has Sonja gained a range of experience, but these skills give her pride and allow her to be selective in her projects. 'I'd never have achieved all of this if I had climbed the corporate ladder, which is monotonous and straightforward – there are no real risks, as everything is laid out for you.

'Whereas if you're doing what you want – even if that means going sideways or down – at least you are following your dreams and you're in charge of your future. You can and probably will fall and break your arm several times, but it's the most fulfilling place to be and you meet all kinds of interesting people along the way.'

#### SWING LOW

Tamsyn Leigh, 31, also finds climbing the jungle gym to be a fulfilling exercise. 'I've always done exactly what I've wanted career-wise: I've been a receptionist, hairdresser, musician, food vendor and restaurant manager. I hate routine, so whenever



I feel unfulfilled, I will throw in the towel and try something new. That's the upside.' However, she's also had to deal with the downs of this type of career climb and has found that employers are wary to hire her due to her busy resume.

Penny agrees that too much job-hopping is not ideal, but by having a variety of jobs under your belt, you get insight into careers and industries you would not have had if you stayed in one place. 'A lot of growth happens through bringing the ideas of one field or industry into another and applying some of those concepts in an appropriate way,' she

## MONEY, MONEY MONEY

It's all fun and games when you're moving up on the jungle gym, or even laterally, but moves to lower-level positions are quite difficult to get used to, especially if it comes with a pay cut. 'It also means your income could be variable over time, rather than steadily increasing each year,' adds career coach Penny Holburn.

The upside? Sometimes opting for a lower-level position to gain skills can result in progressing to even higher positions eventually.