

# Life-Story Writing for Career Change: Is it Effective? A Report on Research

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## Abstract

Thousands of individuals may choose to change careers but due to changing social and economic factors millions will be forced to endure unplanned transitions in situations where they have little or no control over their career decisions. Brown et al (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 62 career intervention studies involving a total of 7725 participants and concluded that writing exercises were the number one ingredient for effective career choices. However, this study did not distinguish between different kinds of writing exercises or methods, such as narrative-based interventions, which use creative, expressive, and reflective writing in career guidance (Lengelle, 2014). While the theory and methods of narrative-based interventions is well established in the field of career development, research and evidence to support their efficacy for career change is only beginning. To help close this gap, I designed an online survey that was completed by 44 individuals who used a life-story writing process for guiding their career change and a control group that attempted career change with non-writing narrative tools. Life-story writing is a narrative-based approach that involves autobiographical writing by individuals about significant work and life events and activities. Results of this study indicate a positive correlation between the intent of life-story writing to 'uncover' a personal story, create a new career identity and facilitate a

positive career change. However, results also indicate that the client-counsellor relationship and, in particular, feedback from the counsellor may be more influential to career change than a particular narrative approach.

Although much theoretical work has been done on how narrative-based instruments may facilitate career change (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey, & Niles, 2012; Gelatt & Gellat, 2003; Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999; Pryor & Bright, 2005; Schlossberg, 1981; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), a literature review reveals that there are no longitudinal studies on the outcomes of career change in relation to these theories using larger sample sizes over a period of 5-10 years.

Outcomes research in the career counselling profession is important, not as infallible guide to truth, but as a reliable means to conduct and evaluate interventions. Brown et al (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 62 career intervention studies involving a total of 7725 participants and concluded that five critical treatment ingredients improve the effectiveness of career choice outcomes at any stage in an individual's career decision-making process: written exercises, individual counselling, models, support, other. The written exercises and workbooks were characterized as "action plans with targets" (p. 413) in this meta-analysis and the authors did not distinguish between narrative-based instruments and other kinds of writing exercises so data

about the efficacy of such interventions for career change are not available from this study.

The purpose of my research study is to help close this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of a narrative-based career intervention, specifically the effectiveness of life-story writing in helping individuals make a positive career change.

Life-story writing involves exercises designed to "uncover" the personal story of a client in order to create a new career identity as part of a career change process. The term 'career change' also requires an operational definition. 'Career' is derived from its Latin root meaning 'wheeled vehicle,' which lent itself to the modern connotation of a singular, linear, vocational direction (the metaphor equating to: 'following a particular path' or 'climbing the corporate ladder') and is most commonly associated with the notion of working permanently in, or committed to, a particular profession, such as a career diplomat in the field of international relations. A career change involves moving from one career path to something completely different; for example, a diplomat representing his/her country in an overseas embassy changes careers to become a home renovator in the field of customer service in a city in his native land. Job change is not necessarily career change; some job change involves promotions, or demotions, with the same employer, or a lateral transfer to a different employer in the same career field, such as a career diplomat with a federal government department becoming a



trade commissioner with a United Nations agency which, for the purposes of this study, is considered a job change because it involves a switch to different but similar or related job duties in the same career field of international relations.

I explain my approach to life-story writing for career change in the first person and in considerable detail because (1) as a new form of career guidance there is no standardized approach commonly used by career professionals for applying narrative-based instruments to career change issues, and (2) different writing exercises and approaches may produce different results. The possibility of individual agency, choice and change is always performed in a dynamic context of theory, method and practice with each individual client. I hope my explanation will help other practitioners in the field better understand and better apply narrative-based instruments to career change interventions.

I report the results of an online survey that was completed by 44 individuals who used a life-story writing process for guiding their career change and a control group that attempted career change with non-writing narrative tools.

### Problem

Thousands of individuals may choose to change careers but millions may be forced to endure unplanned career transitions and other highly challenging career changes in situations where they have little or no control due to changing social and economic factors. While no longitudinal survey has ever tracked the same participants over the course of their working life, The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth has tracked the job changes of younger baby boomers since 1979 (Bureau of Labor Statis-

tics, 2010) but job change is not career change. If career change is now a necessary or inevitable experience for a significant number of people in the workforce, then the reliability and effectiveness of new forms of career guidance related to career change, including narrative-based interventions, need to be established through a critical mass of empirical evidence. According to career researchers Blustein (2006, p. 315) and Law, Meijers and Wijers (2010, pp. 446-447), clients and funding agencies are unlikely to be convinced that such interventions are effective unless they see empirically measured outcomes of statistical significance.

### Life-story Writing

Life-story writing is one of those new forms of career guidance. In terms of a definition, it is helpful to distinguish it from the widely used psychometric trait-factor instruments favoured by most organizational career services which are used to assess a client's interests, personality, or aptitudes, such as the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, the Myers-Briggs Typology Indicator, and Holland Codes. Life-story writing falls within the narrative forms of guidance but is different than "storytelling" or oral practices used in a growing number of narrative-based career services based on the work of key theorists and practitioners (White & Epton, 1990; McAdams, 1993; Savickas, 2005). These practices usually involve one-on-one verbal dialogue as a counselling intervention, structured as an interview during which the counsellor prompts a client to tell stories about life chapters; key events or episodes; important childhood, adolescent and adult memories; significant people or role models; favourite books and media; hobbies and interests; stresses and problems; personal

ideology; and, overall life themes (McAdams, 1993, p. 253-254). In this verbal approach, the client does not do any writing; however, the counsellor may produce a written document to collect the information as part of the intervention. Life-story writing is also organized around a structured process (which looks similar to oral storytelling) but the core modality requires clients to write about their lives in a chronological and/or retrospective manner. For example, they could write about a childhood activity that was consistently satisfying or a particularly enjoyable achievement from their teen years. The idea is for clients to explore their experiences in relation to their external and internal worlds—that is, about the facts, people, events of their lives, as well as their thoughts, feelings, behaviours and beliefs—to uncover themes or patterns related to careers that match their natural strengths, preferences or priorities. In short, life story writing is not an adjunct writing exercise to verbal career guidance but is the main tool used to move clients from their current career identity to a new one. This process often looks and feels like autobiography (Bruner, 1995), and might be called "journal writing for career development," or "life story or narrative work for career choice, or career development, or career identity," or "the storytelling approach to life writing", but is essentially different than autobiography because such writing, as part of a narrative counselling process, involves a relationship between a counsellor/therapist/facilitator and a client. The intention of this interaction is also important in the study of outcomes because it involves the re-authoring of a client's story, that is the incorporation of the uncovered themes and patterns into a new narrative, one that is clear, concise, coherent



and cogent with respect to their career issues.

As a career change practitioner in private practice, I have used a narrative writing method with clients for 22 years, one that I developed from similar writing exercises that I undertook with other practitioners. I demonstrate my life-story writing approach with a case study of the life-story writing exercise undertaken by 27 of the study's participants. Each client, as narrative producer, enters a commercial contract with myself, the counsellor, as narrative interpreter, involving a certain set of conditions, expectations and agreements related to the life-story writing exercise that forms the core of our interaction. I normally meet with my clients face-to-face for a one-hour session to review their career history and determine if the life-story exercise might be beneficial for their career issues. For example, this exercise tends to be beneficial for individuals who are literate, who can access memories from the past, who have the ability and inclination to write in autobiographical terms, and those who have the strength of mind to confront and resolve some of the highly charged emotions that may be triggered by their memories.

If we determine that a deeper analysis of certain events in their life might reveal some "clues" to viable career options, they undertake autobiographical writings according to a specific format. The procedure for collecting the autobiographical writings of my clients follows three basic steps. First, the exercise starts with an inventory of signature events or activities; clients list times in their lives—from childhood to the present—when they are doing what they enjoy most, especially outside of work. They also have the option of writing additional autobiographical information about their life circumstances, such as

major illnesses or injuries, family divorce, relocations, relationships, or other factors that influenced their work and life choices.

Secondly, clients select their top eight stories from the inventory, and elaborate on each of the top eight stories with details according to particular prompts: headline description of story; what triggered the event/activity; detailed description of actions they took; what they found particularly enjoyable or consistently satisfying about that event/activity; and why they stopped doing that enjoyable activity if, in fact, they have done so. By selecting and writing the stories themselves, clients are not passive receivers of expert assistance but active agents in exploring their own lives as it relates to careers and work. The guidelines that I use also follow a timeline from past to present. The emphasis is on writing details about what they did and how they did it, not on why they did it. The purpose of this structure is to keep them focused on positive experiences that may reveal some of their natural strengths and motivations. I have found this simple format organized around a focus on enjoyable activities/events helps to break through resistance and barriers because it removes the client from the 'present' problem and its associations with negative work experiences, especially recent ones. Details are important, but more so their acknowledgement that they have had "success" within the past and recognize it with a positive evaluation of the experience.

Thirdly, after completing the exercise, they give it to me for analysis to identify and define their strengths and motivations, and match them to career options. I provide a written analysis of their stories, one that identifies and defines a motivational pattern consisting of key elements: natural talents, pre-

ferred subject matter, motivating situations, natural relating style, and an essential motivation. This pattern is presented in a reconstituted "Personal Statement" or 're-authoring' of their life-story, and summarized in a schematic diagram. The pattern is then matched to specific jobs in specific work settings that will recognize, reward and motivate the client for this pattern. The words and language used in this new story do not just reflect a current reality but a re-conceptualization of it.

Finally, the client is given a list of suggestions about how to transition from their current identity or narrative into a new career identity, as developed by me based on my interpretation of their life-story writings. The client and I then meet for an hour or so to review my written report page-by-page. The objective of this session is to ensure that they understand key conclusions and suggestions. Then they go away for a period of two to six weeks to digest the report; get some feedback from several people who know them well (such as spouse, sibling, best friend, long-time colleague); do some homework, such as researching my suggestions for career matches; then we meet again to discuss practical steps and actions to be taken towards career change if that is their preferred option. This step involves a concerted effort between my client and myself to leverage this knowledge and understanding into a new career choice that better harmonizes with their needs, priorities, values and natural inclinations.

Together, we have co-constructed a new story and an action plan to complement their self-discovery with respect to career change options. Afterwards a client needs to test this new identity in the real world to see if s/he can build traction towards a viable career option. The process of activating the narrative with my assistance may termi-



nate at this point or continue on a commercial basis for months if a client wants assistance in executing the plan with particular strategies and tactics. An illustration of a typical interaction as described above is provided in this webinar: <http://instantteleseminar.com/?eventid=20848683>.

### Research Question

Can life-story writing help individuals take effective actions to achieve positive career change? Positive career change refers to an individual's transition from an incumbent career identity to a new career characterized by extrinsic and intrinsic markers, such as more income; more congruence between their job duties and values; an increase in positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotions; more clarity and confidence in their career decision-making and, ultimately, satisfaction with their career choices. I hypothesize that life-story writing can facilitate positive career change. I explore this hypothesis by analyzing the outcomes of career change efforts by an experimental group drawn from my clients who used life-story writing as the central assessment tool for guiding their career change process, and a comparison group that undertook a career change process on their own or with some other career professional but used non-writing narrative tools as part of that process.

### Method

#### Research Design

I explored my research premise by inviting 165 clients who had undertaken a career-change process involving a life-story writing exercise to complete an online survey with 52 statements related to

*before and after* conditions of their career-change process, involving two key areas of inquiry: (1) Occupationally: did the desired career change actually occur? If so, what did or didn't help? And, (2) Emotionally/psychologically: was the experience positive or negative?

I also contacted 13 organizations in Canada and the USA with members that I knew personally or by reputation to be practicing narrative career guidance in some manner, and asked them to direct their members to my survey as well. There was a low response rate to my request, which may be due to few career practitioners in private practice or institutional settings actually use narrative-based writing tools, compared with verbal narrative guidance, or the possibility that few individuals actually complete career changes as distinguished from job changes, or other reasons. Lengelle & Meijers (2014) point out that writing exercises are sometimes used as an adjunct tool in career counseling (p. 6), but not as a core modality for re-authoring a client's story for a new career identity.

#### Procedure

Participants were invited to complete the online survey in January 2014 and it was open until June 2014 in order to gather a sample size of some consequence. It took participants approximately 20 minutes to complete a survey involving quantitative questions related to their age, gender, education, and other relevant demographic and career data, as well as qualitative questions scoring their subjective experience of career change and their descriptions of that experience. The online survey link is: <https://app.icontact.com/icp/sub/survey/start?sid=5423&cid=533719>

#### Data Collection

The responses of clients were captured in an online survey form then exported to an MS Excel spreadsheet, which was converted to an MS Word document for easier manipulation of data.

#### Participants

Altogether, 44 individuals participated in the survey. The respondents can be divided into three groups. Group 1 is the experimental group consisting of 27 individuals who completed life-story writing exercises as part of my career service. Group 2 is another experimental group of 6 who had undertaken non-writing narrative guidance with me. Group 3 (control group) was made of 11 individuals who claimed to use non-writing narrative guidance in their career change process with another practitioner, with an employer-sponsored service provider, or on their own. A profile of the 44 participants shows:

- 50/50 gender split
- 95% mid-life adults 30-50 years old
- Two thirds of participants were born and raised in Canada, others in USA, Europe, India, Australia
- All but one had post-secondary education
- Individual Income (21 reported) before career change: 11=\$70K+, 4=\$33-69K, 7=\$-32K (based on Statistics Canada means)
- Employment Status before career change: 20 employed, 9 self-employed, 4 unemployed involving a range of professional and technical workers, managers and administrators, sales, clerical, service, no trades
- Relationship status before career change: 65% married or common law, 35% single, separated or



divorced

- Health: 40/44 participants reported Good or Excellent health before career change
- Durability: Two thirds of participants undertook a career change process 5+ years ago, most of those 10+ years ago

In summary, the participants represented a convenience sample of middle class mid-life adults who attempted a career change process.

## Results

### Effectiveness is a subjective value

Life-story writing is just one tool to help individuals make a positive career change. So, participants were asked in Survey Question #42: *Do you think you have made a successful career transition?* (See Table 1.)

All 44 participants answered, with 29 or 66% selecting 'Yes,' 10 selecting 'No,' and 5 selecting 'Still in Transition.' Of the 27 individuals (Group 1) who completed a life-story writing process with me 16 or 57% reported 'Yes,' 6 said 'No,' and 5 said they were still in Transition.

Of the 16 individuals who reported 'Yes,' their "successful" career transitions included the following changes: IT Systems Analyst to Pet Groomer; Electrical Engineer to Public School Teacher; Occupational Therapist in Mental Health to Medical Research Project Coordinator; Desktop Publisher to Certified Financial Planner; Software Tester to Senior Product Marketing Manager; Medical Laboratory Assistant to Library Clerk; Printed Circuit Board Designer to Musical Therapist; Lab Technician to IT Support Analyst; Senior Telecom Product Manager in a private sector high-tech company to Senior Director, Global Operations in an NGO.

Table 1.

*Do you think you have made a successful career change?*

Answer	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Total
Yes	16	4	9	29
No	6	2	1	9
In Transition	5	0	0	5
No Answer	0	0	1	1
Total	six	6	11	44

Of the six individuals who had undertaken non-writing narrative guidance with me, four or 66% reported a successful transition and two did not. Of the eleven individuals who did not work with me but used some form of non-writing narrative guidance in their career change process, nine or 82% said 'Yes,' and one 'No,' and one did not answer.

The majority of participants in all three categories—those who undertook a life-writing exercise, and those who engaged in narrative guidance in a non-writing manner with myself or another practitioner—rated their career change as successful. A larger control group might provide a more distinct contrast for correlations between those who engaged in life-story writing and those who did not.

Of the respondents who said 'Yes' in Table 1, there was no appreciable difference in responses between the three Groups, so I have not separated them in the following Figures.

### Success is also a subjective value

Participants were also asked to evaluate their career change process in the second part of Survey Question #42: *What markers are important to you that constitute a successful human being after a career change? Here are some suggestions. Feel free to use them or use different markers, and elaborate or clarify what is important to you.*

In Figure 1, we see that respondents more often selected internal benefits—such as increased job satisfaction, meaningful work, and more

congruence between their values and job duties—than external benefits, such as increased pay or career advancement.

### Career change is often assumed to be a disruptive or destabilizing process

Participants were asked to report on their Employment, Marital, Education, and Health status before and after their career change efforts. The status of these markers did not change for most participants. More education was not a pre-requisite to career change for most participants. However, these findings would benefit from closer scrutiny such as qualitative interviewing to determine what other factors were important in the career change of those who completed life-story writing and those who did not, and to what extent life-story writing actually influenced a range of career change decisions, such as whether to invest in further training or education.

About 50% of the 44 participants reported an increase in income following their career change and about the same number reported a decrease in income after their career change. This finding too would benefit from further investigation to determine if an increase or decrease in income was, in fact, a disruptive influence in their lives or were certain destabilizing effects offset by the increase in positive emotions.

### Career change and emotions

Participants were asked to evaluate their general emotional/



**Figure 1.** What markers/factors are important to you that constitute being a successful human being after a career change?

Type	Marker	Selections
External	More income & benefits	5
	Career advancement	6
	Improved health	4
	Other: "more time for community involvement and personal growth; more opportunities; love the challenges; love people I work with; less policy strictures; closer work team"	
Internal	More Job Satisfaction	8
	More duties-values congruency	13
	Clarity about work role	4
	Meaningful work	7
	More fun	4
	Improved relations at home and/or work	2
	More spirituality	2
Other: "less negative; open to new ideas; more confidence; better leader and mentor; self-direction to follow my own path"		

Table 2.

Self-evaluation of emotional/psychological state before and after career change 44/44 participants

Intensity	Emotional/Psychological State							
	Confused	Anxious	Confident	Excited	Fearful	Sad	Angry	Happy
	<u>Before</u>							
Strong	9	11	7	8	11	8	11	6
Moderate	24	16	23	19	17	21	13	25
Weak	11	17	14	17	16	13	20	13
	<u>After</u>							
Strong	2	4	24	21	4	1	1	20
Moderate	8	13	15	15	9	7	8	18
Weak	21	26	5	6	32	35	32	5

psychological state before and after their career change efforts, whether it was a successful change or not. Each participant self reported on their emotional/psychological state according to a Strong, Moderate, or Weak rating. Table 2 shows an inverse in ratings in their states before and after which indicates that the intensity of negative emotions like confusion, anxiety, fear, sadness, anger decreased significantly, and the intensity of positive emotions, like confidence, excitement, happiness increased significantly, for individuals who engage a career change process, even for those participants who did not make a positive career change. Again, there was no appreciable difference in the responses from each of the three Groups surveyed so I have not separated them in Table 2.

The 27 participants who completed a life-story writing exercise with me were asked to evaluate in a qualitative manner the effectiveness of the life-story writing exercise in aiding their career change process in Survey Question #46: *Did the life-story approach increase your ability to construct a new career? If, YES, explain how. If, NO, explain why. Here are some suggestions. Feel free to use them or use different markers, and elaborate or clarify what is important to you.*

The limited number of responses above indicate that life-story writing provided more clarity related to their talents and motivations, which increased confidence. As well, subjective and internal factors, especially limiting beliefs, seemed more influential as barriers

to career change than external factors.

### Discussion

Although the value of moving from one career identity to another has been studied theoretically (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell & Post, 2014; Lengelle & Meijers, 2014; Lapointe, 2010; Law et al, 2010; Vlhjalmsdottir & Tulinius, 2009; Winslade, 2005), research on the effectiveness of narrative work to achieve measurable outcomes is only beginning (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell & Post, 2013, p. 420; Stebleton, 2010, p. 70). Since the majority of participants in all three groups of my study—those who undertook a life-writing exercise, and those who engaged in narrative guidance in a non-writing manner with myself or another practitioner—rated their career change as successful, it seems that narrative-based interventions in general are effective for facilitating career change. In addition, these findings indicate that life-story writing is effective because it fosters self-knowledge, agency, and a clear plan for moving ahead.

In survey questions #47-49, participants were asked to identify three of the five critical treatment ingredients which helped them most in their career change process. Those ingredients identified were written exercises, individual counselling, models, and support. The majority of respondents selected individual counselling as the most helpful type of intervention in their career change process: Of the 44 participants in all three groups who answered this survey question, 29 of them responded that individual counselling when it involved feedback and/or interpretation of their life story was strong or moderate in terms of a positive outcome to their career change. This observation indicates that the key element to a suc-



**Figure 2.** Did the life-story approach increase your ability to construct a new career?

Answer	Reason	Selections
Yes	More clarity about talents & motivations	11
	More confidence in taking actions	4
	Better decision-making skills	0
	More self-knowledge that helped with decision-making	2
	Other: "was a useful too to identify new areas of opportunity as well as present my skills to other stakeholders; was able to spot the elements of any career that would cross my path and felt it would help me attract that career; did a number of trainings that helped me gain further career-related clarity"	
No	Lack of confidence	1
	Limiting beliefs about opportunities for change	5
	Lack of support	1
	Worry about finances	1
	Inability to complete the writing exercise	0
	Intervening circumstances, e.g. illness, death in family, financial independence from lottery win or inheritance	1
	Lack of job search skills	0
	Weak economy	0
	Other: "genuine fear & family responsibilities; fear & hesitancy have made my progress slower; a lack of appreciation for my motivations for choosing to move away from empowering stories in the past; personal reasons; it's not clear to me what transition to make and what the corresponding benefits & sacrifices would be"	

Successful career change may be the nature of the helping alliance between a counsellor and client and not a specific narrative-based tool.

Through research, we can check to see if we are developing reliable tools and methods to facilitate career change. Research also involves the organizing of concepts, theories, processes, mechanisms, and treatments. Although no work has been done to support career change theories and methods with large-scale meta-analyses of aggregate data, we can look at such studies done in the field of psychotherapy as a corresponding guide for career change because the goal of psychotherapy is similar to career change counselling in that one of the purposes of psychotherapy is to help individuals overcome the problems of life, including difficulties with work. While there are real differences in the way psychotherapies are practiced, those that are well performed seem to share fundamental factors, most prominently a "helping alliance" between patient and therapist. Corsini & Wedding (2014) calls this the Whohowwhom factor—what counts

in psychotherapy is who does it and how and to whom it is done. Even therapies based on radically different philosophies and values show similar effect sizes in terms of successful outcome, also in studies utilizing widely varying outcomes (p.167). A narrative-based career change service is not psychotherapy but it is, essentially, a relational modality—humans helping others change—and therefore similar outcomes may apply.

### Conclusion

While this study provides some indications of effectiveness, the limited sample size, small control group, and the similarity in self-reported answers between all three groups in the study does allow me to infer that life-story writing is more effective for career change than other narrative-based interventions. Also, it needs to be noted that there are many dynamic and contextual elements that influence the dialogue between a client and a counsellor/facilitator/teacher in narrative-based interventions (Spicer, 2004, pp. 293-303). More research inot the rela-

tionship between these elements may increase the effectiveness of narrative-based interventions.

What facilitates career change more than a particular narrative theory or method—based on this study—is feedback from the counsellor, specifically the nature of the helping alliance. This conclusion may indicate that the focus of narrative-based interventions should shift from the development of theories and methods to strengthening the helping alliance by identifying, developing and nurturing practitioners with a knack for analyzing creative, expressive and reflective forms of writing and matching them with clients who might benefit from this approach. This may, in turn, help to increase the critical mass of clients and counsellors necessary to assist researchers investigating the effectiveness of narrative-based interventions for career change and other career issues.

It took many decades for psychotherapy to be accepted by our managed care system in schools, corporate HR practices, or government-sponsored community programs. It may take as long for narrative-based interventions to be accepted. Therefore, it may be useful for career program administrators to know even now that empirical evidence from this study shows that life-story writing as a career intervention has a positive influence on and assists with career choice, career planning, and career change, and nurtures a new story or career identity that can be leveraged into career decision-making action. It can also produce clarity about viable options; increase motivation for effective actions; give relief from negative feelings and/or stress. It does not necessarily disrupt or destabilize the personal lives of individuals, nor does it necessarily lead to lower incomes for them but can, in fact, increase income. And, it



often takes two plus years to 'realize' that a client/individual has had an effective and durable career change.

Furthermore, it may be useful for career practitioners to know that: mid-career men and women seem to make career changes in equal numbers when using life-story writing in a helping alliance, and this method increases self-understanding and agency for many individuals resulting in more job satisfaction and congruence between core job duties and core values.

This research adds to our knowledge of how narrative-based writing practices may be used by practitioners and their mid-career clients to make successful career changes.

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