

# Careers

## From practice to The City: my career change

**Julie Ross** is the commercial director at Pets at Home Vet Group. Here, she reviews her career and explains how it has evolved and changed since she graduated in 2002.

I WAS 26 when I realised I no longer wanted to be a vet. The signs had been there for some time, but it took me several years to be open and honest with myself and admit the career path I was on was not right for me. I had wanted to be a vet all my life but now I knew that had been a mistake.

At the time, I was in the third year of my residency at the University of Pennsylvania and on paper everything was going well. I was on track to become a specialist equine clinician; I was graduating out of the most prestigious internship and residency programmes that existed; I had built a powerful and supportive network of mentors – my future was bright.

However I just couldn't see myself carrying on the same career track for

the next 30 years without something very different to stretch and stimulate me. As I explored these feelings, my disillusionment grew and, while to outsiders life was wonderful, I was in crisis.

I'm someone who likes to be in control. I'm logical, highly independent, and I believe we can all achieve whatever we want if we put our minds to it. For the first time in my life I didn't know what I wanted, only what I didn't want. I felt I had no one to turn to – I didn't know anyone else who was feeling like me. I didn't know any future other than being a vet. The non-vet friends I had made while studying at Cambridge were forging successful lives for themselves in London, and none of them would have considered that I could be like them. They respected me, but I was a vet. Vets don't do anything else, right?

### Taking control

I didn't know who could help me, so I helped myself.

While studying for my Board exams and working through the final six months of my residency, I set aside two hours every weekend to work on my future. I didn't know life coaches, career coaches etc, existed and as a resident earning \$25k a year I couldn't afford any help anyway.

So, instead I did it myself. I mapped out what I wanted from life and from my career and thought about what motivated and challenged me. I then looked at every career I could find and how they mapped against my own personal criteria.

I knew I wanted a career that could be perpetually challenging, interesting and stimulating and I wanted to escape the pigeonhole of 'being a vet'. I realised quickly that I needed to start again and reconciled myself to the fact that I was going



Julie with her husband and their dog, Oscar

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**'I didn't know who could help me, so I did it myself'**

to move back to the bottom of the ladder. It was important to realise and accept this early as it freed me up to really explore new opportunities.

I decided that I had two potential paths – law, focusing potentially on life sciences, or business. I decided moving in to business was ultimately the best way to give me the widest set of options and opportunities.

To truly get into the business world I knew I needed some re-education. While I could have joined a pharma company and made my way from that vantage point, I really wanted a clean break. I decided my options were to pursue an MBA or to join a strategy consulting firm where I would learn about business from the inside.

I decided that the latter was my best option and set my sights on joining one of the top global strategy consulting firms. If you're going to do something, I believe you should do it well.

### Making the change

This wasn't an easy transition to make and it took me two hard years to complete.

### MY CV

- Cambridge vet school
- Intercalated degree, history and philosophy of science
- Clinical externships at the University of Davis, California and Rood & Riddle, Kentucky
- Equine, small animal practice
- Internship, Rood & Riddle
- Large animal residency, New Bolton Center, Pennsylvania
- Dual track residency, emergency and critical care
- Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine
- Epidemiology research, Animal Health Trust
- Defra, veterinary adviser infectious disease, companion animal welfare
- Strategy consulting, Bain
- MBA at INSEAD business school
- Commercial director, Pets At Home Vet Group

I moved back to the UK and accepted a role at the Animal Health Trust, working in the epidemiology team. This role helped me learn about project management, working with non-clinical stakeholders and also what it feels like not seeing animals every day.

I then joined Defra as a veterinary adviser in Whitehall. I met some fantastic people, learned how to work in a corporate environment and got some amazing experiences, including negotiating in Brussels, developing regulations, working with ministers and generally learning how government works. Through all of this, it was continually reinforced to me that with hard work and determination, I could learn new things and do well.

During this time, I was continually networking and moving towards landing my real transition role. I started by talking to everyone I knew in the business world and asking for their help. This was a humbling experience. I had to start telling people I wasn't sure I wanted to be a vet and explain a very personal and painful story. I can do it easily now, but then it was really hard.

I spoke to many helpful people, but also to a few who said they would 'never hire a vet' or who scoffed at the idea of starting again at my age. Importantly, I also started to find people like me: a friend from vet school who had become an accountant; a medic friend who was working outside of medicine; another doctor whose story was just like mine and had joined a strategy firm, and his friend who had been a vet. It was then I started to believe that I could really make this happen.

Telling my parents I was going to career change was awful, but ultimately all my parents cared about was that I was happy and the most difficult thing for them was seeing me so desperately sad. They gave me the confidence to go out and make the best decisions that I could. My parents are pretty amazing people, but they are like the vast majority of parents – they just want us to be happy – whatever our age, or career.

Through sheer hard work and determination I gained

interviews with the top global strategy consulting firms and spent my weekends preparing for the interviews. It took months of preparation. I worked harder for this than for anything else I have done. And then, one fantastic day in January 2009, after countless interviews, I was accepted by Bain. Bain is a global strategy consulting firm; in the UK it is based in the City of London.

When I interviewed at Bain I knew I had found my 'home'. The people I met were, in many ways, just like me and I met a number of career changers from all walks of life.

I wasn't even asked why I didn't want to be a vet until after my interviews were finished. All they cared about was my talent and capabilities – I found this incredibly refreshing. They knew that diversity in a workforce is a good thing and importantly, they believed in me.

### **New start: tough but worth it**

I joined Bain in August 2009. It was a baptism of fire. I had so many new skills to learn and I was working with an elite group of people in an environment where being average was not acceptable.

The first years were extremely tough, but I loved it. I worked across numerous industries, in different countries and on many different types of projects. I met doctors, vets, palaeontologists, soldiers, economists and scientists who had all come together in this rather random world of strategy consulting.

I stayed at Bain until January 2014, having been lucky enough to have a year out to complete my MBA at INSEAD business school during this time. For me, doing my MBA this way, rather than as the way to make my career change, was the right thing. I was able to use my MBA as a time to learn and to build a new, international network without the worry of making a career transition.

I'm now commercial director at Pets at Home Vet Group. I didn't think I would ever leave Bain, but the opportunity came up at a really interesting time, so I made the leap and joined in January 2014.

I started in a strategy role and have moved through a couple of different roles to now sit on the Board and lead the Commercial Division.

It's an odd turn of events to find myself back in the vet world – but our industry is interesting and the opportunity has been great.

My responsibilities are completely non-clinical. I lead the strategy, commercial and marketing teams and have responsibility for corporate social responsibility as well as general leadership. I'm lucky to have the added benefit of really enjoying being around vets and in practices and I understand what a tough day in practice feels like.

One of the strengths I bring to our senior team is an understanding of what it really means to be a vet – what's important to vets as professionals, the critical importance of clinical freedom, and the central focus that each case has in the life of a vet. I think this helps us do the right thing as a business.

I'm also a Trustee of World Horse Welfare and I like the fact that I can still contribute to equine welfare, although now in a very different way.

My career journey is far from over and it's not been easy or smooth – I suspect it never will be. The thing I'm most proud of is the courage I've had to make the change away from being a vet.

The scale of my career transition is not right for everyone, but it was right for me. I'm passionate about letting vets know about the options that are available to them and helping people understand the transferable skills they have.

We are not just vets and it's essential to be aware of that. The dropout rate from the profession concerns me, but my greatest concern is helping people find fulfilling alternative careers. We are highly trained scientists with excellent degrees and, in general, high levels of problem-solving, numerical and communication skills.

We can do anything – and we owe it to ourselves and others to change the mindset of the profession – stopping practising as a vet is not a failure, it's a wonderful example of how talented and diverse we are.



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