

# OVER-50: OUTSMARTING YOUR COMFORT ZONE

By Jane Genova

A series of several parallel white lines of varying lengths and thicknesses, slanted diagonally from the bottom left towards the top right, positioned on the right side of the page.

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Dedicated to Michele Jaworski who  
inspired me with her courage in exiting her  
comfort zone

## Other Books by Jane Genova

“Ageism Is Diversity Issue: Rebranding as Age-Neutral”

“The Critical 14 Years of Your Professional Life”

“Over-50: The Monsters of the Mind”

# Articles Published on Ageism by Jane Genova

<http://www.odwyerpr.com/story/public/10553/2018-04-26/ageism-audits-rebranding-clients-as-age-neutral.html>

<http://www.odwyerpr.com/story/public/10495/2018-04-16/ageism-bites-both-workers-businesses.html>

<http://over-50.typepad.com/over-50/2018/03/phone-interview-how-not-to-sound-old.html>



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Your Coach – Jane Genova

Your Next

# INTRODUCTION



Your comfort zone is a powerful hybrid: part mother, part monster.

The mother part is about what feels familiar and good. That minimizes stress. You joyfully float in the womb of routine.

The monster part is what does you in. That's because it seduces you into staying put.

Therefore, you miss out on opportunity.

To remain in your comfort zone, you don't go for that promotion or change of job.

When laid off, you resist the recommendation in outplacement to shift your career path from the downsizing field of journalism to marketing communications.

You don't "hear" when the head of law firm says you have to bring in business if you want to make partner.



Way back in 1908, two psychologists discovered why a comfort zone impedes success. Those were Robert Yerkes and John Dodson.

They found out that growth – be it professional or emotional - mandates exiting the boundaries of a comfort zone.

Outside is what they labeled “optimal anxiety.” That consists of the higher level of stress which goes along with navigating fresh kinds of experience.

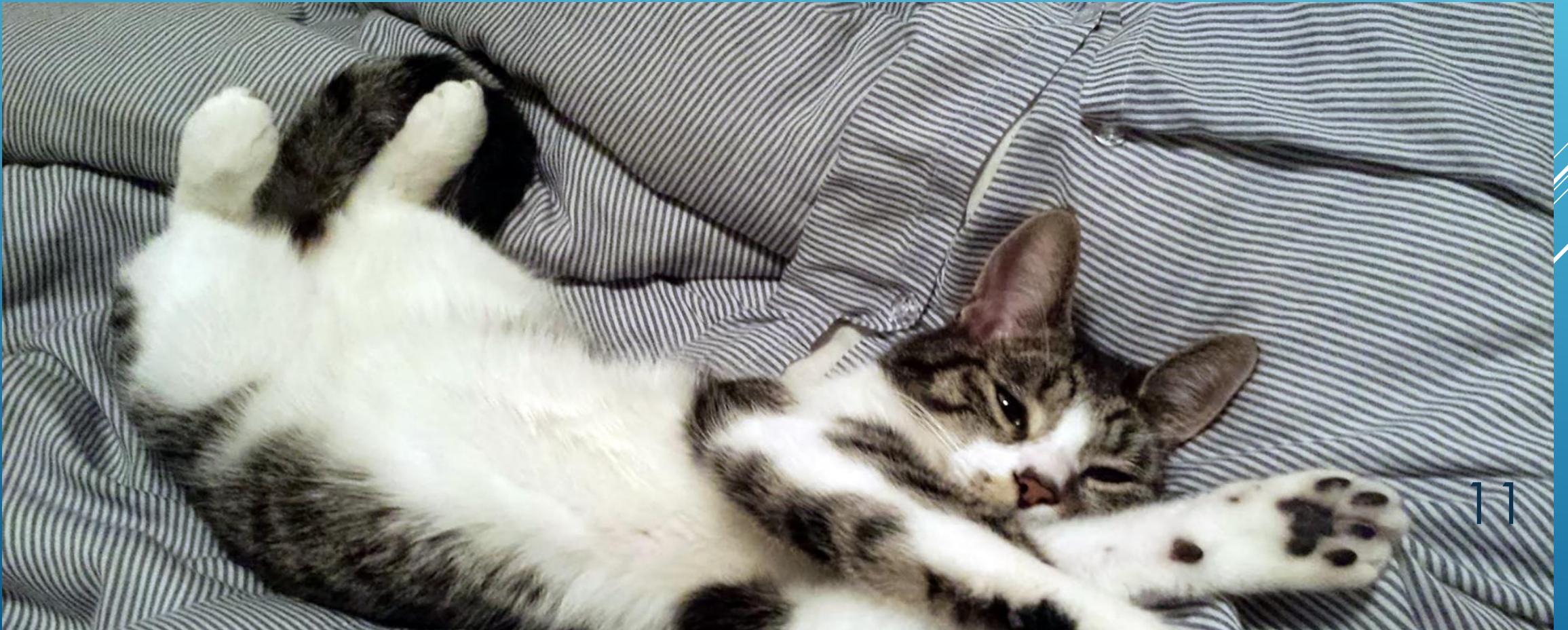
However, it's not so much stress that you will be overwhelmed. As you become adept at mastering new situations you will take on larger and larger challenges.

Your new state of being is what might be called “productive discomfort.”

The good news is that it is possible and highly probable that you can outsmart your comfort zone. You bet, your comfort zone is plenty smart. This book is your guide for:

- ❖ Understanding what your unique comfort zone is. Everyone's comfort zone is different.
- ❖ Recognizing why you have remained in a repetitive loop. Or, on the other hand, have become reckless in trying to deny that a comfort zone really exists.
- ❖ Implementing The Great Escape. Among those who have fled their comfort zone have been Dr. Bob/Bill Wilson (co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous), Clint Eastwood (with film "Tightrope," 1984), and engineer Susan Fowler (who outed Uber's alleged sexual misconduct).

# CHAPTER 1 – Inside Your Unique Comfort Zone





One of my colleagues who is both a career coach and psychotherapist referred to a comfort zone as the analogue of The Roach Motel: What goes in doesn't come out. At least not without threats such as job loss or a reward such as tripling their salary.

What is inside each person's comfort zone is as unique as his or her fingerprints. Therefore, to even take a peek at what's going on in your comfort zone requires knowing who you are.

That goes back to ancient Greece. On the temple of Apollo at Delphi was inscribed the phrase: Know Thyself.

And the same mandate heads the advice in "What Color Is Your Parachute - 2018." That career guide confirms that, yes, the world of work has become volatile. But the exact wrong strategy is to become Zelig-like. That is, struggling to reconfigure yourself to fit every shift in every professional context.

Instead, that “Parachute” career guide hammers the importance of taking the time to do an inventory of who you are: professionally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Only then can you construct a gameplan for getting, holding, and moving on to better work. That could be in the private sector, nonprofit, or government.

Before you can locate the exit ramp for your own comfort zone you have to research what personality traits, experiences, and dreams landed you in your very own version of the Roach Motel.

Each comfort zone is different. That’s because the details of each human life are different.

Your comfort zone might have hardened into impermeable boundaries because of trauma. Your father abandoned the family when you were five. You cling to security, at all costs.

Or it might have happened because not rocking the boat got you promoted in the military. Your playbook excludes initiative and out of the box thinking.

Or, you don't explore new things because the time you did, like attempting a career change, produced catastrophe (or so it seemed to you at the time).

There is no one way to do your "due diligence."

Some decide they need help digging. They consult a therapist, clergy, 12-step-program sponsor, psychic, or a coach like myself.

Others believe they have the courage and insight to look inside themselves.

And there is a third group. They reach back into the past, interviewing those from the old neighborhood, relatives in the extended family, school acquaintances, former colleagues, and current significant others.

When Will Meyerhofer realized he had to leave his professional comfort zone, he was advised to interview those who really knew him. From them he was to find out who Will was and is. Like all humans, he had plenty of blind spots.

Out of that came the decision to train to become a psychotherapist. Today he operates a successful practice in Manhattan.

That doesn't exclude publishing books about his reflections on life and participating in the arts community. Once out of a comfort zone, more and more becomes doable.

Whatever route you go to Know Thyself, following are the key questions:

- Who were you before you were overtaken by the “oughts” from other people, systems, and spiritual programs? You need to find that person. To be optimistic during this exercise, keep in mind the words of the hymn “Amazing Grace.” You were lost and then you were found. Often a rigid comfort zone is a hang-out for the lost.
- What have been the major stress triggers? And, have you experimented managing them in offbeat ways?
- Were there downright catastrophes in your life and how did they affect you? Yes, catastrophe changes you. But that psychic shift can be positive. It was when they lost just about everything through drinking that Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson made it their mission to establish a program to put alcoholism into remission. That program – Alcoholics Anonymous – has helped millions.



- What people, places, and things transmitted a blind faith in maintaining the status quo? On “Blue Bloods,” NYPD Commissioner Frank Reagan attributes his Roman Catholic background for that. In later episodes he does push back against his earlier blind faith.
- What happened when you tried new things and failed?
- What happened when you tried new things and succeeded?
- And, what do you fear most?

The next step is to take your answers and divide them into two columns. One column is for what is keeping you in your comfort zone. The other is for what has served to motivate you to find a way out of repetitive risk-averse looping.

After that, you are to write or record on audio/video your story of avoidance and acceptance of risk. Highlight the emotions. It's through those that human beings perceive their reality – and gain control over it.

Here is an excerpt from such a story:

*“A boy in the neighborhood who delivered newspapers tried a shortcut across the ice. Law enforcement speculated the weight of the newspaper sack prevented his escape from the water. My family nixed that idea of mine for earning money.*”

*“From then on I bucked them. They wanted me to become a medical doctor. After college I sold cars. I was good at it. On the marriage market I became a ‘catch.’ My wife is stunning and we have two great children.*

*“But somehow the family’s message got to me. It was law school, not medical school. For eight years I practiced law in a large Chicago firm. Then, in 2008, the legal sector was hit hard during the financial crash. I didn’t make partner and there were no other comparable jobs.*

*“Where I wound up was emotionally paralyzed. I blamed my family for its obsession with professional status. Yet, I lacked the hope to return to some kind of sales. Put that in ‘comfort zone’ talk and I guess I am stuck mandating myself to be in a prestigious position in a big city and, at my age and given the market, that’s not in the cards.”*

For him, that clarified his situation. He knew the next step was to come to terms with why he could not break out of what was preventing him from exploring other ways to earn a living.

In telling your story, if only to yourself on paper, you will tap into:

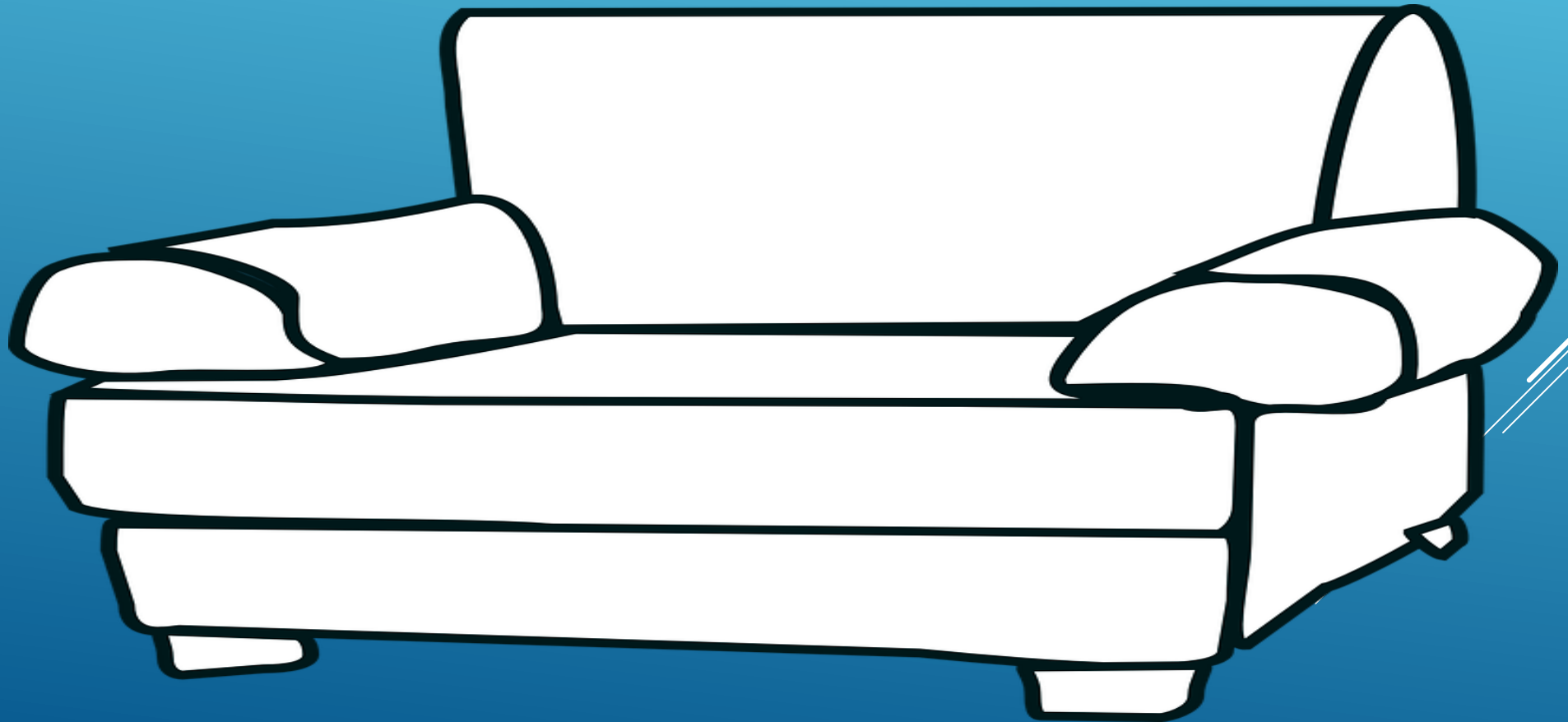
What is underlying how you make professional decisions

How much of that has hardened into habits

The emotional openings which could allow you to venture out, if only a little, and experiment with change

Where courage came from in the past which fortified you to see your world in fresh ways.

# CHAPTER 2 – Five Very Good Reasons Why You Stay in Your Comfort Zone



Comfort zones are, well, comfortable. Of course, you want to hang out in yours. It provides a kind of sanctuary from what you are not willing to deal with, at least at the time. Even high risk-takers need to create a comfort zone now and then to relax and regroup.

Let's look at the five reasons why you love yours.

*Maintaining a stable professional identity.* At the business school Insead Herminia Ibarra researched the concept of a professional identity. In the paper she published - "Identity Transitions" – she documents how central to the self a work identity is and how challenging it is "disengaging from a central identity, while exploring, and eventually integrating another."

No fool, you anticipate how soul-wrenching it could be to change jobs or careers. The situation is analogous to the crab which must periodically shed its shell. Until the new one grows, the crab is vulnerable.

*Treasuring the “Cheers” of professional life.* Work is a social activity. Even those operating remotely need to get things accomplished through other people.

Everyone, as in “Cheers,” knows your name. Your birthday gets celebrated, either in-person or with digital good wishes.

Often relationships at work are more meaningful than those at home. That’s why psychologists warn against having “office wives” and “office husbands.” Those can make actual spouses resentful. Of course, you want to continue belonging to that particular team.

This social aspect of being part of a group exerts such a powerful pull that recovered addicts will return to their former “friends.” The substance abusers had been warned by their counselors that going back to the old neighborhood will trigger relapse. And it usually does.



*Knowing whom to trust.* Gradually, you sized up the players and figured out whom to trust and on what matters. Charlie, for instance, can be relied on to deliver the report on time but not on relaying accurately what's being said about you in the grapevine.

Given the political side of all organizations, this kind of insight is essential to survival. In a new position, you would have to start all over again “collecting data.” Meanwhile, you are flying blind in terms of superiors, colleagues, and subordinates.

*Being certain, at least of some things.* The world, your organization, and customers/clients are always changing. But some things stay the same and those you can depend on. For instance, you are certain about the cultural norms at your current employer.

Sure, new leadership could take over and change those. If that attempt works, it would take time. Even a strong leader such as Lou Gerstner didn't implement a new culture at staid IBM immediately. In your current job you have the advantage of understanding what kinds of changes are actually happening, how threatened is your position, and what should be your timing in leaving.



*Owning your success.* You have achieved X and Y in the organization or along a career path. Everyone is aware of that. Most importantly, you know that. Or, if you were laid off from that job, you remain aware of what you had accomplished.

In a new context, there is high uncertainty about what you will achieve. That's a major reason why older workers who lose jobs opt to retire, taking Social Security early. They can't even imagine starting all over again. It also underlies the reluctance of those in downsizing industries such as the newspaper business to train for other career paths.

One or more of the five are holding back so many seasoned professionals. Simultaneously, though, a growing number have decided to not allow themselves be closed systems.

Producer Dick Wolf has transitioned from fictional television shows such as the “Law & Order” series to re-enactments of real criminal dramas.

U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts keeps surprising conservatives with his rulings.

And, entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel has become a political activist.

# CHAPTER 3 – Seven Strategies to Outsmart Your Comfort Zone



There could be that moment of clarity.

You are riding the Metro North commuter train from Greenwich, Connecticut into Manhattan. You know that by this point in your career your daily life doesn't have to be such a grind. All you have to do is just take a peek at the jobs the executive search firms are recommending to you. So, you say to yourself: I'm stuck. And I don't need to be. Yes, I will search for a better job fit.

Or you have been unemployed 18 months. Everyone, including the experts in outplacement, told you that you must find a new way to make a living. There isn't a big demand for 63-year-old film critics for newspapers. Suddenly, there is that ah-ha experience. You see life in binary terms. Either you change careers and work or you don't change careers and don't work.

The next step is to outsmart your comfort zone into letting you go. Following are seven proven strategies.

*Take ownership of this decision.* You are the one who made the choice to stretch yourself. It's irrelevant what the supposed experts said, how family is pushing you to change, or the size of the debt you're in. Ownership of this decision puts you in control. You decide how fast or slowly you will proceed. At any time, you can ease off and take temporary refuge in your comfort zone.

*Have confidence you can transform whatever into gold.* The ethos of Silicon Valley is that failure is a prerequisite to big-time success. That's because the lessons it imparts can't be ignored. Also, the professionals grow a thick skin and ignore what others, including the media, are saying about them.

In the early 1980s, Pepsi marketing guru John Sculley left his comfort zone in the beverage industry. He joined the high tech world of Apple. That was a roller-coaster ride which ended 10 years later in his being fired. From that risk his reward was that he got tech down cold. He became wealthy and professionally satisfied by becoming an investor in that sector.

So what that the media vilified him for firing Steve Jobs and that one of his products - the Newton - was disappointing.

Just like Sculley, you are the score-keeper on your success. And, currently, failure is success.

*Start expanding your social circles.* The fear of losing the social capital you've acquired will lessen as you develop new relationships. In itself, that will shake up your professional identity. You will find you have many selves beyond the vice president of accounting or dean at XYZ law school.

That can be as simple as engaging the clerk in the convenience store in a conversation. You will find out more not only about that human being but also about yourself.

You can apply for part-time jobs. On them, you might discover a fresh career path.

Other social outreaches include volunteering in a political campaign, joining a church, coaching a team, and treating the dog to walks in different locations. Dogs are social magnets.

In his breakthrough book “Necessary Endings,” executive coach Henry Cloud hammers the necessity of continuing to prune professional and social networks.

*Absorb the peril of standing still in a fast-moving economy.* The cliché of the day is that taking no risk or not enough risks in the current world of work is a tremendous risk.

Old-line Campbell food company hasn't changed its core. Its chief executive officer Denise Morrison abruptly resigned.

The major question among investors is if Facebook can overhaul its values ahead of severe regulations around the world. If put in that kind of regulatory box, the door is wide open for competitors to take over the market.



On an individual level, you the professional have to have the mindset of an entrepreneur with a startup. Trying out what might work is the only way to survive – and then, hopefully, scale.

*Factor in long-term rewards.* The payoffs from leaving a comfort zone go way beyond the better job or getting back to work. The gains continue long-term.

At the top of the list is that for you the unexpected will be less traumatic.

The reality, as you well know, is that the current world of work is filled with uncertainty.

For instance, mergers and acquisitions (M&A) have become a best business practice. They put in play major disruptions, especially in manpower needs. If your company is part of the M&A, instead of being overwhelmed with fear you will be strategic in looking after your interests.

Another plus is that every future change will be easier. Actually, you will be scanning the horizon for opportunities. Not simply struggling to hold on to what you have.



*Start with minor shifts in the daily routine.* Comfort zones are made with hundreds of routines. Those habits wind up controlling you, almost like voodoo.

Blow up the power habits have over you by revising small rituals. Instead of walking the dog on X street you will introduce Fido to Y street. Read The Wall Street Journal before reading The New York Times as you traditionally do. Watch the evening news on CBS, not NBC.

It will amaze you how liberated you will feel by being the one back in charge of how you run your daily life.

*Forgive yourself for comfort-zone relapse.* Progress isn't linear. Today you might contact an executive search firm or a community college about training to be a substance abuse counselor as a career change.

Tomorrow you might decide that outreach was a mistake. Maybe it was. If so or even if not your primary responsibility to yourself is to not default into self-criticism.

You're wired to run back into your comfort zone. That's just the way it is. All that counts is that you find an exit again. Four steps forward, three backward. That leaves you one step ahead.

You might only need one of these strategies. Just being able to own the process may do the trick for you. You are in charge of customizing the playbook for working.

Or, you may use all seven. Along your journey, you might engineer other kinds of strategies. Share that information. No one over-50 determined to remain working can afford being stuck in a comfort zone.

# CONCLUSION



The history of mankind is jam-packed with sagas about how individuals, organizations, and civilizations became prey because they valued the status quo more than reality.

That's a central meme in the works of William Shakespeare. King Lear was determined to view the world as he wished it to be. That world turned on him. He went mad.

Ironically, so much of the current stress that is triggering mental illness seems to result from trying to avoid stress by supposedly playing it safe in a comfort zone. The monster part of the comfort zone creates the illusion of safety.

# YOUR COACH – Jane Genova



Age bias in professional life? It's there. Reluctance of seasoned professionals to leave their comfort zone and change jobs? Commonplace. But, as a coach, I help the over-50 develop a new playbook. My name is Jane Genova.

The edge I bring is my background in marketing and sales. That means job searchers learn to think, write, and talk like salespeople. In addition, like salespeople, they come to understand that success requires always reaching beyond a comfort zone. I have reserched and created marketing and sales material for global outplacement/career-transition firm RiseSmart.

### **APPROACH:**

Action-oriented. Structured around four questions: Where are you now, where do you need/want to be, and what's standing in the way.

Then, I make recommendation. Together we establish an action

## EXPERIENCE:

- Paid career coaching for diverse professionals, pro bono coaching for displaced lawyers, and volunteer coaching for mothers in recovery returning to workplace/education.
- Paid communications coaching for employees at AT&T.
- Coordinator for Detroit Recorder Court, Wayne County, Michigan and Chrysler Job Training program.
- Graduate assistant for two Dale Carnegie courses. Objective was to motivate students to leave comfort zone.
- Created marketing/sales content for RiseSmart, a global outplacement/career transition firm. That included white papers, email blasts, and blogs.
- Career columnist for AOL and Wall Street Journal Jobs Report.
- Lecturer on career transition at the New York State Bar Association.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING:

- Awarded fellowship for graduate studies in counseling and interview technique at Case Western Reserve University.
- Completed three Dale Carnegie seminars – Fundamentals of Communications, Elevator Speeches, and Marketing and Sales. Won first prize for presentation of elevator speeches
- Awarded fellowship for seminar in advanced financial communications provided by McGraw-Hill.
- First-year student at Harvard Law School (left to ghostwrite book on regulation).
- Awarded Fellowship for MA/Ph.D. Candidacy in linguistics, University of Michigan.



## TESTIMONIALS:

Mark Misercola – Speechwriter

“For the past two years, Jane has helped me age more gracefully by opening my eyes to new opportunities and endeavors that will serve me well when I eventually retire. And some – like writing about my passion for collectible cars – I’ve already started on.”

Tara Belsare – Physician

“Jane encourages me to examine aging with depth and wit. She encourages me to write about the process. She has opened my eyes to the fact that I am, in fact aging.”

Name Confidential – Disbarred Lawyer

“Nearly 70, I was able to move onto a new career path.”

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU

Complimentary consultation. If you wish to continue, sliding scale fees. Please set an appointment with Jane Genova  
janegenova374@gmail.com