

CAREER

REINVENTION

BOOTCAMP

Module 9:
How to Translate
Your Background

Audio + Transcript

Pamela: We are now talking about translating your background into the language of your new career. This is a very critical piece of reinvention. I like to say this is the “crux of reinvention.” It’s where the rubber meets the road.

The biggest mistake that many people make in their reinvention is to send out their materials or try to move into a new field without translating their background.

This shows up like going out, sending out your resume, looking at a job and saying, “Wow! That job is great!” You know you have the skills and talents for it. You read it, it sounds perfect for you, and you just ship off your resume. What do you hear? Crickets.

I actually had a woman in a seminar say to me, “I’ve sent out hundreds of resumes and haven’t heard a thing.” I said to her, “You probably haven’t translated your background for them. You look at that posting and know how you fit into that, but if you haven’t bothered to put your background into their language, they can’t possibly know whether or not you fit.

“You’re asking them to translate it instead of you translating for them. If they have a stack of 50 or more resumes, they don’t have the time. If it’s not completely obvious to them how you fit, you’re going to be passed over. That’s why you’ve had no response to all the opportunities that you’ve tried to put out there.”

This is a critical piece. You want to make sure that your background is understood.

There are a couple of areas of translating your background. The first and most natural one is the words that you use, your language.

Consider the analogy of reinventing your career and going to a different industry as moving to a foreign country. You make that move, and now, all of a sudden, you’re in Brazil.

You’re trying to get a loaf of bread. You’re going in and saying, “I want bread,” and they’re looking at you like you’re crazy because you’re using the word “bread,” which has no meaning now that you’re in Brazil.

Now you have to find the Portuguese word for bread. Until you understand how to say that word, which happens to be “pão,” you’re not going to get any bread. They’re not going to understand you, and you’re going to have to go away hungry.

The same philosophy is the case in reinvention. You have to understand the words that they use to describe those things. Otherwise, they're going to look at you like you're crazy. You're not going to be understood or get what you want.

The words you use and how you use them to describe yourself are the crux of what needs to happen. This is what you need to translate. You need to be very mindful of the words you're using to describe yourself, what you have to offer, and what you've done in the past.

The favorite story I like to tell is about my reinvention from Wall Street to entertainment. My title on Wall Street was director of agency and reseller sales.

Basically, outside of that company or little financial information genre that I worked in, that had no meaning. Certainly, when I started doing research for the entertainment field, I did not see any agency or reseller positions. I knew that I had a problem. I didn't see those words at all in any kind of job postings.

I reached out to a native, which is something we talk about in a different module. I didn't say I was the director of agency and reseller sales because those words had no meaning in that industry. I said to this native, "Here's what I did on Wall Street," and described it in the language of skills and talents, which are universal.

I said, "I worked with our partners in foreign countries that represented our products in their territories. Does it exist, first of all?" He told me yes, so I said, "What's it called?" He said "licensing."

I said, "In the US, I worked with the partners that took our information and sold it through their own channels. Does that exist in entertainment?" He said yes. I asked, "What's that called?" It's "distribution."

Then I knew that the terms for what I did were "licensing" and "distribution." I could then use those terms in describing my background.

As I said, my title was director of agency and reseller sales. I didn't change my title on my materials. Why? It's because when a company calls human resources, they want to make sure that your title matches. Otherwise, there's going to be an issue. You have to leave your title whatever it is, even if it's untranslatable.

That doesn't mean you can't use those words to describe the content of what you do or yourself in your emails, cover letters and materials. Even though my title on my resume said

“director of agency and reseller sales,” in the blurb that described what I did, I said “licensing and distribution of financial information.”

Boom! All of a sudden, they got it. I had changed what my description was before. It went from sales agents, which didn’t have any meaning, to “licensing and distribution of financial information.” All of a sudden, it was in their language and they got immediately what I did.

That was attractive to them, and that’s how I got my position. You want to be able to have that same kind of translation experience.

There are little words. Another example I like to use is the word “traffic.” “Traffic” has different meanings, depending upon the industry.

If you’re talking about the internet, traffic means the number of visitors to your website. If you’re talking about TV, traffic is actually how you schedule the ads. If you’re in radio, traffic is what you report on. Depending upon where you are, that word has three different meanings.

You want to be fluent and use the words that are in the industry that you’re targeting. If you say “viewers” but are moving into an industry where the term is really “visitors,” now all of a sudden, they know you don’t belong. That’s going to sound dissonant to them.

It adds a little barrier. When you’re asking somebody to take that chance on you, you have to lower all those barriers and make them feel like you understand, get it and belong, even though you’re coming from somewhere else. You have to speak their language. Those are the subtle things.

Now let’s talk about how you find the language that you need. First, foremost and most obvious is to look at job postings. If there are terms you don’t understand, it’s translation time.

I always like to keep an actual diary or list of all the terms that you need. This is what it takes to keep you fluent. You need a little dictionary or Berlitz guide to the key terms and phrases and understanding what they mean.

Look at job postings and pull those words out. What do they say they are? What terms do they use to describe whoever their customers are? You want to pull all of that out and keep that in your hip pocket.

The other things you want to look at are industry and trade publications. In fact, there's an online newsletter that compiles enewsletters from all different industries. It's really helpful.

Why you want to look at trade and industry publications is because they're not bothered to be translated for outsiders. They're going to use all that jargon because they're talking to their audience.

It's very helpful to start reading those publications because you will be abreast of what's going on in the industry, which is part of this translation process, understanding the cultural milieu and what's happening.

You're also going to be flooded with a bunch of terms that, basically, are going to sound like Greek. That's a rich mother lode of terms that you want to be able to translate and start weaving into what you do. You're speaking the language.

Also, follow blogs of people who are in the industry and using terms that are for their audience. This is really critical.

Sometimes there are actually specialty products for an industry. That is another way. Look at the products and see how the instructions are. How are those described? Those can also be another angle in.

You can take classes. If it's something that has an academic bent or is a hot industry, a lot of schools will offer classes. It's another great way to learn the industry terms that are being used.

The other piece, and I touched on this, is that beyond just the language, part of understanding the culture and translating your background is to fit within the society of the industry. That means understanding the trends, news and social mores, so to speak. This is very subtle but important.

Every industry has its own cultural norms and way of doing things that make sense to everybody there, but outside, really don't make too much sense. Part of your immersion into the new foreign country of that industry means knowing those cultural mores and following them.

Just as if you're in a foreign country and do something that is against those cultural constructs, you're going to stick out like a sore thumb. Everybody will be looking at you, horrified. The same is true in reinvention. You want to be able to fit within that industry.

One example that I like to give is somebody who was on the dais with me at a conference that I spoke at. She was talking about how she had given a talk to an industry of television writers about using LinkedIn to connect for social networking and could feel that it was falling flat.

She didn't find out until the next day that for television writers, it's not about connecting through LinkedIn. In fact, in that specialized circle, they were all connected through Facebook, and the goal was to be funny through Facebook.

These are the kinds of things that are really important to know because if you're trying to make connections with TV writers and do so through LinkedIn, they're going to know you don't belong. You need to understand what the cultural mores are and make sure that you show up and fit. It's learning to assimilate and what those things are.

How do you find out the cultural mores? This is where your native contact comes in really handy. You've done your homework and research, so you ask them, "Where do people in this industry congregate? What do they do socially? What are their goals? What kind of people are they personality-wise?"

These are the kinds of things that help you fit and understand what's happening within that culture so you can then begin to translate your experience.

Here's another example from my transition from Wall Street to entertainment. When I picked up the phone to call, one of the things I asked this particular native was about, culturally, what was important.

As you might imagine, he said socializing was important in entertainment. Of course it is. That's the whole image. It's everybody schmoozing over dinners.

Then I knew that in my materials, I needed to highlight the fact that while I was on Wall Street, part of my job was to entertain the foreign partners when they came to town. In fact, my boss hated that. Basically, it was tasked to me to do all the entertaining. He never wanted to go out with any of them and, in fact, refused. I did all the entertaining of all the foreign clients.

Understanding that that was an important part of the culture allowed me to pull that aspect of my background out and highlight it in the materials so that they knew that I had now translated my background. I said, "I know this is important to this new industry, so let me pull it out and frame it."

Then all of a sudden, they could hook into this. I made sense to them. I was using their terms but also showing them that culturally, I got what's important in that industry.

I pulled it out of my background, so I translated that. I didn't force them to look for this. I pulled it out and said, "Here are the things in my background that show that I understand and fit into your culture."

This is the subtlety of translating your background. It's not only using the words, but it's pulling out those things that show that you will be able to fit in that industry. It's whatever it is in your background and experience that demonstrates that you get the culture. This is how you translate your background.