Knowing when to cut your losses p.s. it's not a waste

Sunk cost fallacy

Setting your own trigger point

A trigger point is analogous with a gambler setting themselves a limit or folding, or a mountaineer setting themselves a point at which they know they need to turn back. Setting these points or changing direction isn’t a waste of effort or a failure. In these analogous examples the consequences of not setting or ignoring their trigger points can be catastrophic.

To set your own career trigger point you need to set a clear, measurable, threshold that once (or if) it’s met you change your career direction.

If we stick with the analogy of gambling, a trigger point may be ‘once I’ve lost £50 at roulette, I’ll leave the casino and go and do something else’. The something else isn’t the important part of the statement, what is crucial is setting and sticking to the threshold point that you’ve set.

If we consider a hypothetic postdoc now setting themselves a career trigger point of when they’ll stop pursuing a career in academia the trigger point statements could look something like –

* ‘I’ll submit [number] of fellowship applications and if I’m not successful I’ll start to look for career opportunities beyond academia’
* ‘I’ll try to get a tenure-tracked role for [number] of years, if I’ve not achieved this by [year] I’ll do something else’
* ‘If I haven’t got a permanent academic role by [month/year] I’ll look elsewhere for a job’

Again, the important part is committing to change career trajectory if the conditions of their trigger point is met.

Fighting sunk cost fallacy thinking

Approach 1 (adapted from <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180914-the-trick-to-learning-when-to-cut-your-losses>)

When making a decision about whether to persist with your current course of action or not you can ask yourself;

(1) ‘What would I gain if I stuck with this option and what would I lose if I switched?’ and then

(2) ‘What would I lose if I stuck with this option and what would I gain if I switched?

If you’re still unsure if you’re deciding based on facts or not, think back through the whole chain of decisions that have led to you this point, and when reviewing each decision in the chain ask yourself if you were presented with the same choice again, would you make the same decision? If not, why not?’

Approach 2 (adapted from <https://researcherblogski.wordpress.com/2018/12/23/changing-direction-can-be-the-rational-choice%EF%BC%8Dhow-to-base-career-decisions-on-your-present-not-your-past/>)

1. Assess your present skills without thinking about how you got them. Pretend you just woke up one day with this skill-set.
2. Assess future options. Starting from now what are the costs and benefits of different options from now going forward?
3. Talk to someone else about your reasoning and justify your decision/s. The important thing here isn’t that they agree with you but that you’ll have a tough time in justifying your decision/s if it’s based on sunk costs now that you are aware of this fallacy.

Further reading

[Changing direction can be the rational choice – how to base career decisions on your present not your past – Karolinkska Institutet Career Blog](-%09Assess%20your%20present%20skills%20without%20thinking%20about%20how%20you%20got%20them.%20Pretend%20you%20just%20woke%20up%20one%20day%20with%20this%20skill-set.)

[The trick to learning when to cut your losses – BBC Worklife](https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180914-the-trick-to-learning-when-to-cut-your-losses)

[Emilie Wapnick’s TEDxBend talk ‘Why some of us don't have one true calling’](https://www.ted.com/talks/emilie_wapnick_why_some_of_us_don_t_have_one_true_calling/transcript?language=en)

[My first postdoc position was a disaster. This is what I learned. (2019) V S C Wong](https://www.science.org/content/article/my-first-postdoc-position-was-disaster-what-i-learned)

[The Science of Quitting – Dr Maya Shankar](https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/a-slight-change-of-plans/the-science-of-quitting)

[Is the ‘sunk cost fallacy’ sinking your career? E Williams](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/sunk-cost-fallacy-sinking-your-career)

[Why perseverance might actually be hurting your career](https://learnloft.com/2017/03/08/why-perseverance-might-actually-be-hurting-your-career/)

[How susceptible are you to the sunk cost fallacy? D Ronayne, D Sgroi and A Tuckwell](https://hbr.org/2021/07/how-susceptible-are-you-to-the-sunk-cost-fallacy)