



Does Switching Career From Non-Profit to Big Business Always Mean Turning to the Dark Side?

How three purpose-driven professionals who started their career in cause-related organizations and migrated to “the other side” continue to do good.

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour

When we set out to write this article, we were interested in looking at the mirror reflection of an article we wrote years ago about executives leaving the world of profit, and moving into purpose-driven roles. Even within the scope of that article, we came across those who had made the reverse transition previously, and some of our subjects made that move later. So, we began with the hypothesis, somewhat naïvely and possibly judgmentally, that the transition in the opposite direction involved

some sort of selling out, a kind of compromise, or pact with the devil, à la Dorian Gray. What we discovered leads to the highly diverse stories that follow, and some illuminating conclusions on the nature of the chiaroscuro of the world of work.

Tanja – The multi-talented provocative Serbian journalist who enlightened the oil and gas, media and tech sectors

At the age of 15, Tanja wrote a letter to herself and sealed it in an envelope for the next ten

years. Inside, she expressed the dream of becoming a journalist who wrote travelogues and novels. However, her actual version of journalism was being beaten over the head by the police during student protests, during the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milosevic in her native Serbia. The physical scar is still with her, as are the myriad actions and reactions around justice and rights for all.

Tanja's quest had been obvious from early childhood. A multi-talented individual with the energy to apply to whatever was "right", she did karate at six "to fight bullies and protect the weak", and typed petitions of all kinds to demand her own and others' rights. This all gave her the hunger for extensive studies, in Law, International Relations and Business, as well as photography and more.

With a healthy skepticism about "big business", as well as for much of the politics surrounding her, Tanja embarked on her initial career as a journalist, against the background of civil war, atrocities, and school friends disappearing, whether voluntarily and overseas or not. The high point was having an article published on the front page of one of the few opposition-led newspapers in the country, criticizing the corrupt police system. This led to her being heavily interrogated and forced to leave this cherished job.

From here, she continued her lofty ambitions while working in Serbian schools, on digitalization projects. This led to a post as the right hand to the Minister of Finance. Having heard that "other earning opportunities were significant", she left a few days later, disillusioned once more.

More studies and deeper exploration led to a role in a potentially extremely "dark" place, but Tanja's work heading a team of PR professionals in the court system of Serbia raised transparency significantly, and they were awarded an international prize for their efforts. She had brought light to the obscurity. She was beginning to understand that interests of good and bad could meet at interesting crossroads, and that there was a potential for more light going forward.

Having discovered it was possible to improve

Name

Tanja Tatomirovic

Most recent 'profit' role

Head of PR,
Communications &
Philanthropies,
Multi-Country Cluster
at Microsoft



Previous 'purpose' roles

PR advisor, spokesperson and USAID
coordinator, Supreme Commercial Court of
the Republic of Serbia
Author of a book on [fascist radio propaganda](#)
Journalist, "Demokratija" daily news

Nationality

Serbian

Education

PhD, Management of Culture and Media
MSc, Communications
BA, International Relations and Diplomacy

even the murkiest of activities through vision, conviction and determination, Tanja then chose to spend substantial periods with a mission to conquer and enlighten the petrochemicals and media sectors. Here, she honed her skills and initiatives in corporate communications and social responsibility. She was working in some of the "darkest" industries known, but opened up to the public, and increased accountability via communication. She also established a foundation, which still does important work for society and the environment. At this stage, it was becoming more and more clear that the purpose was in the opportunities that profit-driven organizations have, namely resources. "Regardless of whether that is money, knowledge or technology; even small steps, consistently taken, can take us far enough."

It was the idea of having vast resources with which to do more good that led to Tanja join Microsoft eight years ago, after further work in the oil and gas sector, as well as media. Her desire to learn and adapt constantly is endless, and it seems to be this that allows her to continue to be doing "good" while creating value for her employers, however "bad" they may be.

At Microsoft, roles of increasing seniority and geographical scope have kept her engaged. She is

often tired, but never jaded. As she says, “the feeling of doing something just for money is not pleasant at all, but then you take money from the for-profit and donate it to purpose driven parts, and the feeling is completely Robin-Hoodish!”

Her consummate skill as a communicator is trusted and valued in her organization, but even now, she struggles with a desire to be direct and not particularly subtle when it comes to convictions and principles. She admits that learning to be a diplomat has been hard, and she is still occasionally accused of “being too much of a journalist”. She guesses that “I am asking questions that not everyone is ready to answer”, and continues to eschew the role of “corporate person” as much as possible.

Tanja recognizes that her journalist friends find it difficult to see how she navigates the path of working for one of the biggest companies in the world, and being purpose-driven. But she knows her moral compass, and “sleeps well at night”. Her work is extremely demanding but she measures her success by whether she has “achieved one positive thing a week, whether teaching someone something, improving a small business function, or helping an organization achieve more”.

Would she go back? She misses her days as a journalist, but is also extremely lucid about the state of journalism today, and is not sure she would thrive in that environment. She contemplates the unlikely possibility that she could write her own texts and thoughts completely uncensored, concluding that she would enjoy it, but must face the reality of needing to learn her own self-censorship.

With the ongoing dream of bringing more people together, more often, and creating more agreement, Tanja offers the following advice to aspiring Robin Hoods: “Make the starry sky together, and light your way. A lone star can never give enough light, and so it usually just burns out on its own”.

Derek – The South African doctor who did a stint in corporate America to advance global health

Derek’s initial choice to study medicine sprang from having grown up in an open-minded

Name

Derek Yach

Most recent ‘profit’ role

SVP Global Health and Agriculture Policy at PepsiCo

Previous ‘purpose’ roles

Director, Global Health, The Rockefeller Foundation
Executive Director, World Health Organization
Group Executive, South African Medical Research Council

Nationality

South African

Education

BSc Hons and Master of Public Health (MPH), Epidemiology
MChB, Medicine



household in South Africa during the Apartheid era. His privilege caused him to question why suffering, whether physical, social, or other, was so unfairly distributed, and his decision was to choose a profession where he could have an impact. Sure enough, in addition to anatomy, diagnosis and patient care, Derek got active, even militant.

Early on, his mentor pulled him aside, and, suggesting Derek was not cut out to be a great clinician, told him she had recommended him to a friend, an epidemiologist. Off he went to work on the frontier of research into how health was affected by class, ethnicity and education, in this deeply divided society. As the end of apartheid emerged, more research work could be done, the previous academic boycott of South African medics lifted, and the international horizon opened up to Derek. He was researching into HIV, tuberculosis and had already become interested in how to reduce the effects of smoking on the world population.

At this time, the WHO made Derek their first South African medic in thirty years, and he gladly joined an existing program called “Health for All”. Soon enough, under an exceptional Director General, Gro Harlem Brundtland, he got involved in “Pathfinder Projects”, most notably on smoking. As a result of a federative

approach, and a great deal of negotiation internationally, the world's first treaty for health was adopted and one tangible example of progress was that the group achieved smoke-free sports stadia across over 180 countries, and heralded the end of smoking in sport.

After a change of Director General, Derek found he disliked the bureaucratic constraints of the UN world, and spent a short period at Yale, where he discovered the value that can be created by working “with the bad guys” in the food and pharmaceutical industries, rather than pitching the science against them. Here, his engagement with the Oxford Health Alliance led to the creation of a private-public partnership committed to gradual change “for the better”, including Novo Nordisk, McDonald's, PepsiCo, Nestlé and others. His clarity about the path of progress to tackle the neglect of chronic diseases and their risks was increasing, and he felt more and more comfortable straddling ideological bridges, convinced that he was always doing “more good by preventing”.

At that point, PepsiCo approached Derek and asked him to come and head a new set of initiatives aimed at accelerating portfolio transformation for health. The lure was to create more sugar-free drinks, reduced-salt and fatty snacks, produce more healthy foods, and to change consumer behavior toward favoring such things. CEO Indra Nooyi was all for the idea of bringing public health policy debate inside and using it to create viable products. Many in public health began to accuse Derek of going far over on the dark side. He rationalizes the move, and the nearly six years he spent in PepsiCo, supporting removal of palm oil from the group's products in Mexico, and a collective 6 trillion calories from the diet of Americans, alongside other giants, as engaging the commercial sector to do better, incrementally.

When the time came for Derek to leave PepsiCo, feeling he had gained enough momentum for progress, he joined a company, the Vitality Group, where the aim was to incentivize people to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Although the company had its own, quite clearly lucrative agenda, engaging with

Charles – The UN Chief who Narrowly Avoided Switching to the Dark Side

Name: Charles Petrie

Nationality: French / British

Education: BA, International Affairs and Art History, MBA

Inspiration: Childhood stories heard from his grandmother and her friends about WW2, camps, resistance and “who had had a good war and who had not”.

Early career: International banking and consulting

Shift to Purpose: invitation to join the UN while on a consulting project in Sudan

Time spent in Purpose: 20 years+, across Africa, Middle East and Asia

Primary Purpose: humanitarian assistance, conflict resolution and innovative, context-driven peace creation and maintenance, added to an unusual willingness to speak up

Catalyst: attempting to get the UN, the guarantor of the Convention on Genocide, to investigate one of their own, accused of having participated in the Rwanda genocide. This ultimately led to his resignation from the UN

How he almost flipped to the other side:

The founder of Bancroft Global, Michael Stock, an heir of the Loeb banking dynasty, embarked on a long and pressured seduction process to attract Charles, including private planes and rides in Rolls Royces. Charles was interested in the opportunity to join the private security firm but only if they would “embrace who they really were (i.e. private security contractors who are seen to engage in and support some of the dirtiest work on the planet, whether political or industrial)”. He wanted to invest fully in the Montreux process, and take a lead in creating a code of conduct for the industry. The debate went on for a year, but ultimately no common ground was found. “The UN label would have been deeply useful for them, and that was what they were interested in buying. But I could not see the benefit to me if I could not get them to engage in the improvement of their true industry”. Today, Charles continues to battle for justice from a base in Africa.



insurance companies for mutual profit, there were some genuinely positive outcomes of the tools on increasing life expectancy clearly backed up by evidence-based reports and papers.

The momentous “final episode” resulted from an article Derek wrote for The Spectator on

tobacco “harm reduction” which turned out to be the most downloaded article ever for the publication. It attracted the attention of the CEO of Philip Morris International (PMI), who, after a stealthy approach, invited Derek to form a separate, objective, but funded by PMI, foundation “Smoke Free World”. Despite Derek’s repeated assertion that funds are firewalled, and there is no direct influence possible, as defined by the requirements of US law, he has attracted a great deal of media and lobby attention. He is now banned from WHO conferences globally and decried by the majority of those who saw him as a positive medical authority years back, when he was campaigning “on the other side”. Yet, he is convinced that tackling adult mortality rates by substitution of classic tobacco products with e-cigarettes and other harm reduction innovations will have a far faster and better outcome than only educating children not to start smoking or vaping. His calculations suggest that scaling up harm reduction will save 3-4 million lives per year for the next three decades. This is what allows him to feel mostly impervious to the criticism.

We asked Derek what advice he would give someone young starting out in a career to ‘change the world.’ “Do the research, know more than the others, and explore things far beyond your specialized subject.” And “understand delayed gratification – it takes a long time!”.

How has Derek managed this incredible journey to the “dark side”? By sticking with his convictions and not taking the criticism too personally, however painful. He recalls being lambasted on a radio interview in the UK: “If your company is serious about reducing sugar, why not just eliminate Pepsi Cola totally?” However, with his typical sharp wit, he was able to riposte: “Well, that would make life wonderful for Coke, wouldn’t it?” He has consistently looked for the best vehicle available to carry him along with his mission and acknowledges that there will always be naysayers on all sides. While publicly he is more rejected than supported by many in public health, he has found ways to remain

Name

Jean-Marc Liling

Most recent ‘profit’ role
Analyst at Crescendo
Venture Partners

Previous ‘purpose’ roles
Consultant, JDC
Executive Director, CIMI
(Center for International Migration and
Integration)
Protection Officer, UNHCR
Legal Advisor, Government of Israel

Nationality
French / Israeli

Education
LLM, Public Law
Bachelor’s degree, Law
Bachelor’s degree, Public Administration
(‘Sciences Po’)



unofficially in touch with those who believe, like him, that good science will eventually prevail. He has been driven by an innate willingness to challenge the status quo, a huge dose of persuasion and negotiation skills and an incredibly thick skin. One feels that wherever he goes, his enthusiasm to do good will never go away, however faintly drawn the boundaries might be in every direction.

Jean-Marc – A serendipitous path from public service and humanitarian organizations to venture capital

Jean-Marc grew up in a liberal but socially engaged expatriate environment. The son and grandson of Jewish “survivors”, he felt indebted from the very outset. Dinner-time conversations, whether in Geneva, Paris or Brussels, were focused on human rights, women’s rights and more. His first incursion into personal growth, freedom and new horizons came at 16, when he asked to attend boarding school in Israel. University studies at “Sciences-Po” in Paris deepened his sense of civic responsibility. However, the pull of Israel was ever present. He decided to backpack for a year, then entered a yeshiva, or religious seminary, for another long period. Study of Law in Israel was a pragmatic next step, which would open doors in his new

“I am the privileged connector between the wealthy and the field, creating both the means and the meaning. My overall mix of activities is what keeps me from being too extreme.”

home. But unlike his classmates who were swanning off to fancy law firms, Jean-Marc opted for a role at the Ministry of Justice and at the Prime Minister’s Office, where he found an opportunity to influence human rights, welfare and diaspora issues.

A change of political context led to a short period of unemployment, but Jean-Marc had sent his CV earlier to the UNHCR. By good fortune, he found himself a week later working as legal advisor in the world of refugees. “It was a really good fit, though serendipitous” he recalls. Jean-Marc did not much appreciate the environment of the UN, and learnt as much about “how not to do things” as anything else, but he fell in love with the cause, “seeing people’s despair as well as their hopes”. He left the UN after a few years, and did some volunteer work in NGO’s.

The next move was rather a surprise and revelation to Jean-Marc. He was approached by the JDC, known as “The Joint”, to do fundraising work, supporting the mission of this global-leading Jewish humanitarian organization. While the causes embraced by the organization resonated strongly with Jean-Marc, he was flummoxed as to how he could be of use “as I did not know the first thing about finance!” Fortunately, the recruitment team was able to allay his fears and place value on his transferable skills, such as having a vast array of languages, being highly networked, and imbued with a deep passion for the Jewish cause. He accepted and became accomplished in engaging people, one individual, family or foundation at a time, enthusing about the possibilities afforded by giving to the organization.

The freedom to explore people and investment strategy across the world opened Jean-Marc’s eyes to other possibilities, including going into impact investing. His attention was partially diverted for a couple of years while he led an organization assisting

economic migrants and refugees. He stayed with The Joint, and kept up his work on reduced hours, continuing to contribute to the cause he so deeply believed in. When things became politically too unpleasant at the refugee organization, he had a fortuitous lunch with a donor to The Joint who was delighted to discover that Jean-Marc was considering leaving: “he wanted to set up a venture capital fund in Israel, and hire me into it”. “But why would you even be interested in hiring me?”, reacted Jean-Marc. The response was gratifying at several levels: The donor trusted him, could see his potential as an interface between investors across the world and the fund, and he felt that he “owed” Jean-Marc for having opened the door to the potential of investing in Israel.

Over the next few months, the offer from the venture fund rolled around in Jean-Marc’s mind. As he met his “smart, good ‘mensch’ future colleagues”, and negotiated terms, such as working only four days per week, and having the scope to look out impact investment deals in addition to the pure profit-focused ventures already on the books, he could see that this might resemble a move to the “dark side”, as some of his friends were accusing him. However, he realized that what he would be doing at Crescendo would not, in the end, be so very different. He had developed and loved the privilege of being the agent who brings meaning to the donor. And the difference between a donor and an investor was not so very great.

When he started at Crescendo, Jean-Marc was dumbstruck by the contrast between the sleek co-working space full of glass walls, fine art and beautiful people, and his previous offices in run-down, often temporary or makeshift accommodation. His initial wobble was “wait a minute, I love being in the field, listening to people’s stories and discovering how to help them”. But he soon discovered that he had a special role to play in the new firm: that of access to “the field”, as well as that of conscience or heart. He is already bringing impact opportunities

to the group, and keeping up his NGO work alongside.

One of his mentors describes Jean-Marc as an ideological realist, or a realist dreamer. His versatility affords him a wide range of opportunities. “I am the privileged connector between the wealthy and the field, creating both the means and the meaning. My overall mix of activities is what keeps me from being too extreme.” Jean-Marc never experiences his work on “this side” as a dichotomy, remembering constantly that the attentive ear is valuable in every context he straddles. “You need both roots and wings. I know I can really be the junction between heaven and earth, flying, just like a dancer.”

Jean-Marc’s advice to anyone wanting to fly between these two entities? “Do anything and everything when you are starting out. Enrich your horizons and thinking. You can see great or terrible leadership in the smallest of restaurants as well as in glass skyscrapers.” He adds how important it is to focus on and discover what inspires you, reminding that sometimes the less direct path to where we thought we wanted to go is the one we are actually supposed to be on. “When you walk around the world with a sense of curiosity and an open heart, the world answers you.”

Bringing light to the darkness

So, is there, indeed, a true dark side? As we searched, within and around the stories of our subjects, we struggled to find anything that was totally devoid of light. Of course, we are aware that we did not interview leaders of exploitative cotton production companies in Xinjiang or of blood diamond mines in Africa, who probably did not set out to do good at any stage in their career paths. It is also worth mentioning that

Nine Tips for Making the Move from Light to Dark(er)

1. Be clear about your true purpose and personal values before making the move
2. See the move as one that allows you to explore new ways of doing good
3. Appreciate that resources -- money, knowledge or technology -- are the key to greater impact
4. Be ready to negotiate your terms and defend your boundaries
5. Know your transferable competencies and skillsets, so that you can reveal novel ways of using them and bring value
6. Get ready to have your ego and personal identity tested
7. Stay true to your moral compass and maintain your ethical boundaries
8. Don’t hesitate to keep a broad mix of activities to keep yourself from being too extreme
9. Spot the links and connections between the light and the dark and be ready to walk openly into them

we received a lot of pushback from some professionals whom we asked to be interviewed, who were possibly less proud of their current activity, compared to the ideal with which they set out on their careers. What is certain from our stories here is that, where there is a will there is a way, and it is quite possible to weave a positive path through industries and sectors that are perceived to be “bad”, without compromising one’s values. Indeed, it is strong convictions and values that predominate here, along with creativity as to the method required to bring light to the darkness.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Harbour** is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption!