

It's not surprising that Shepherdson is enjoying the anonymity; her career has always been closely watched, particularly because this isn't her first bold exit – she famously left Topshop as brand director in 2006. “You need those breaks in order to look objectively at your life – you can't do that while you're working. Having physical as well as emotional distance really helps. I feel strongly that you should never be somewhere where you're unhappy.” Shepherdson is honest about the fact that “it's easy for me to say that because I've got the luxury of being at least a little bit more financially solvent than most people”. And not having children also played a part in her desire for change: “I think the not having kids thing is a big part of it because... there's nothing stopping us going. Also, we haven't had those changes in our lives that you have when you have children.”

SO, OFF THEY WILL GO: SHEPHERDSON AND HER HUSBAND FLY TO VANCOUVER for three months in the spring, then San Francisco for another six. And then? “I might come back and do something totally different. Who knows?” The vague answer doesn't surprise me, but if Whistles was Shepherdson's second act in retail, I doubt it will be her last. I suggest her next role might involve supporting women, something she's always done in her career – whether that's creating clothes that women *actually* want to wear or calling for quotas on boards. “It might well be,” she smiles, conspiratorially. “I spend a lot of time with young designers trying to help them forge a path. I love doing that. I'm a feminist and I'm not afraid to say so. If I could persuade women that, yes, you can do whatever you want to do, then fantastic.”

What Shepherdson really wants is to have a break for long enough so that she's “desperately excited about doing something again”, she tells me sincerely. “I feel like I need to take time, like leaving a field fallow for a year.”

Sitting in front of me is a woman who is rewriting the template for what our careers could – or should – be. For here is someone proving not once, but twice, that if you have confidence and courage – and you know who you are – then you can reinvent the wheel. You can take a gap year in your fifties without fearing that you'll never be able to return to an industry. You can get to a point where you're a little bit frustrated and think, I don't have to settle. I want to learn some more.

As I get up to leave I admire her cut-off jeans and she sticks them out for inspection: “I always cut jeans, don't you? It's the only way to get the length you want.” I tell her I'd be too scared to take scissors to an expensive pair. Doesn't she worry she's going to cut them wonky or too short? “No, I do it every time,” she says. “When it comes to the length, I think you just *know*.” And there Shepherdson shows her ace – whether she's making a choice as small as cropping jeans or as big as quitting her job, she is forever driven by her innate sense of conviction. I can't wait to see where it leads her next. ■

HAIR AND MAKE-UP LINDSEY POOLE. STYLING SOPHIE HOOPER

REBOOT YOUR CAREER

Need to rethink your working life? Start with these tips from author Jo Usmar



USE THE SMART-ASS MNEMONIC TO SET GOALS

“I want to be rich”, “I want to be admired by my peers”. Good for you! But how rich? Which peers? Statements like that are too vague. You may have heard of the ‘SMART goals’ process before (the ASS bit is my own). Use it to define what you want, value and what you'll do to get it. Your goals should be: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-specific, Ambitious, Scary, and Satisfying.

2 SWAP THE WORD ‘RISK’ FOR ‘OPPORTUNITY’

The word ‘risk’ is defined as ‘a situation involving exposure to danger’, so if you're considering a change of career or a sabbatical and ask yourself, “Is it too risky?”, your decision will seem frightening. By asking, “Should I take this opportunity?” instead, you'll be more open to seeing the positives as well as potential negatives, enabling you to make a fairer assessment.

3 GET ORGANISED

Proactivity is the key to success. If you're organised, you have time and space to nail your to-do list and think about things in a more inventive way. Make your bed, sync your diary with your calendar, give yourself a uniform, and don't work hungry. Streamlining your life will allow you to concentrate on succeeding at the bigger, more interesting things.

4 Talk persuasively

If you want something, asking “Why can't I...?” invites people to respond negatively; use “Let's...” or “I'd appreciate it if we could...” Equally, regarding pay-rises, “Can you explain your reasons for not giving me a pay rise?” invites your boss to list your faults. Instead ask, “What more can I do to prove I've earned a pay rise?”

5 DON'T AVOID NEGOTIATING

If you avoid negotiating, you'll lose out. Imagine you're offered a job at £60,000 per year and you accept. The boss breathes a sigh of relief, then thinks, “I was prepared to go to £67,000. Why didn't she negotiate? I hope she's going to be able to negotiate contracts favourably for us...” If you don't ask, you don't get. *Extracted from This Book Will Make You Successful by Jo Usmar (Quercus, £8.99)*

