

TOP 4 TIPS FOR PEOPLE STRUGGLING EARLY IN THEIR CAREERS



Common decisions with which young adults struggle include:

- Should I do an M.B.A.?
- Should I stay with a big public-accounting firm or get a job in industry?
- What kind of work would really suit me?
- What should I be when I grow up?

Of course, 20-somethings aren't the only folks prone to uncertainty. But they're particularly susceptible. While 20-somethings always have been disposed to career anxiety, their worry is more intense than ever. In our fast-shifting economy, the stakes are higher for early-career professionals and the margin for error slimmer.

The cost of higher education has spiraled at a time when many parents are cash-strapped. The pressure is on early to make the "right" decision. Young adults often feel that ambling along, making it up as you go, isn't an option.

Great Expectations

A heightened awareness about careers can worsen this anxiety. College and university students are bombarded with advice. In addition to career centers on campus, career-planning courses are part of the core curriculum at some schools. Among the best-selling issues of newsstand magazines are those that trumpet "where the hot jobs are." The clear implication is you should know what you want to do when you grow up.

With the exception of graduates entering in-demand fields, such as engineering and computer technology, 20-somethings face a challenging job market. In the past, employers hired for potential, but today they seek new hires who can hit the ground running and deliver results immediately, rather than taking time to learn the ropes.

Managing your career in this new workplace requires assessing your skills and interests and evaluating a multiplicity of options to see where you might best fit in. For young people with limited or no work experience, making career decisions can present a conundrum. As so many ask: "How do I know I'll like it if I haven't done it?"

Many 20-somethings are fearful of making a poor career choice and anxious to make the "right" decision.

The Cure for Career Anxiety

The following advice can help 20-somethings cope with early-career anxiety.

1. **Recognize that there's nothing wrong with not knowing what you want to do.** Don't overestimate the consequences of making a "mistake."
2. **Be aware that many possible career paths exist.** Twenty years from now, you aren't going to look back and say, "If only when I was 25, I had done A, B and C." A decision may appear momentous right now – particularly if you have student loans or parental pressures to contend with. In the long run, a choice you make now will have little or no impact upon prospects for your career success.
3. **Focus on building a portfolio of skills and experiences that will ensure longer-term employability.** Mapping out an entire career doesn't make sense given the fast-changing nature of work, and the economy's accelerating shift toward temporary employment. Even a full-time "permanent" position may last only a few years, and work is increasingly done by contract professionals and self-employed consultants. The long term usually takes care of itself.
4. **Make every experience count, even the bad ones.** As painful as they may be at the time, bad experiences can be valuable and important. Few successful professionals haven't had a hideous work experience. It's simply part of growing up and part of how we learn what we like and don't like.

Career angst is painful, full of indecision and soul-searching. Some young adults try to avoid it by limiting their options. Rather than seeking a field that will best match their interests and skills, they surrender to the marketplace and pursue a "hot" career path, regardless of its suitability.

Engage with your career angst, and you'll emerge from the struggle with a clearer sense of your values and priorities and a commitment to career success.