

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT CAREER AFTER COLLEGE



Summary: After college, how do you go about finding the right career? Here is some guidance on how to find the right career after college.

You've just finished your final exams. Now what? If you're like many students, you're thinking, "I don't know what I want to do. How do I make the right career decision?" or "It's so tough out there. How do I find work when I have no experience?"

First, don't panic. Most young people don't know what they want to do. After all, with so little hands-on exposure to different types of work, how could you know what different careers and jobs are actually like?

Identifying What You Want to Do

Know your skills. Conduct an inventory of both your technical skills – those you may have acquired through classes in such disciplines as marketing and business analysis – and general skills, such as problem-solving, communication and taking initiative. Also consider the following questions: How do your friends, teachers and former employers describe you? In what areas do people consult you for advice (for example, fashion, dealing with relationship problems, the cultural scene, tricky problems with a professor)?

Identify your interests. What engages you? What do you like to think about and read? What topics do you discuss with friends? What academic subjects interest you the most and why? Consider what you care passionately about – perhaps it's the environment, music, social justice or being able to spend time with your friends.

Review your accomplishments. They are a clue to what you're good at, what motivates you and makes you feel good about yourself. If you're like most students, you'll say you haven't really accomplished anything. But after working with hundreds of recent graduates, I know that, on closer examination, you'll find this is simply not true.

Consider these accomplishments that speak directly to a person's skills and maturity:

- Working 15 hours a week while pursuing an education full time and earning good grades
- Traveling to Europe by yourself for the summer and finding part-time work to fund your trip
- Pitching yourself successfully for a job for which you weren't qualified, or convincing an employer to hire you even though there wasn't an opening
- Starting a membership organization in your field, creating a conference or producing a music festival

Analyze summer and part-time jobs. Previous work experiences, no matter how much you hated them or thought they were stupid, say a lot about your interests and talents. For example, one young woman worked in a coffee shop. She found the work dull but was proud of the fact that she was trusted to open and close the shop. For her it meant that she was responsible and could be disciplined about following through on commitments.

Thinking about these past jobs will clarify your preferences for how much you want to interact with people, solve technical problems, provide customer service or make decisions. Consider also whether you prefer direct supervision or autonomy, researching and analyzing or brainstorming with a group of people, working in an office or in the field, or working in a fast-paced, fluid environment or a more predictable one.

Identify the interpersonal interactions you enjoy and excel at. For example, are you good at meeting new people and charming them? Providing people with information? Collaborating with people in a team environment? Defusing potentially explosive situations with annoyed customers?

Collect ideas. Start a portfolio of information on careers that might interest you. Research different jobs, study job boards and read profiles of interesting people. After a month, review everything in your portfolio. What about these jobs appealed to you?

Think exploration, not final destination. Career decisions aren't like a ring toss where you either get the ring on the peg or you fail. All work experience, good and bad, counts to the extent that it provides an opportunity for you to learn something about yourself. Don't become paralyzed because you don't know what to do. Commit to try something. Think of it as a date, not a marriage.

Relax. It's a struggle to figure out what you want to do "when you grow up." Trying out different work situations and auditioning different types of work roles, even if they prove to be a miserable match, will ultimately serve you well. Show your parents this column if they are concerned about your lack of career direction.

Whether or not you are able to identify exactly what you want to do, thinking through these questions will provide you with an understanding of what you are good at, what you care about, and what you enjoy. This will put you ahead of the game because you will be able to articulate who you are – the foundation for making career decisions and marketing yourself to employers.

Tips on Finding Work

Understand what employers are looking for in candidates. Talk to human-resources professionals in a variety of organizations and business sectors. From your conversations, create a list of desired general skills and competencies employers seek. Show you have the right competencies on your resume and in interviews.

Understand the specific role and industry you are targeting. Think about the nature of the work you would be doing, the pace of the job and the particular sector. For example, if you're looking for a customer-service job, you must be able to solve customer problems, be poised and unflappable in a fast-paced environment, and know when and how much initiative is important. Similarly, a job as a lifeguard requires being alert and decisive in addition to having lifesaving skills. Learn more by talking to people in various jobs and sectors and by reading magazines and online resources. Shape your resume accordingly.

Show enthusiasm for the job and industry. Employers, even when hiring for summer employment or contract jobs, prefer to hire someone who has a longer-term interest in their field because they know such jobs can lead to a career. Enthusiasm is one of your most powerful marketing tools.

Network broadly. I'm surprised at how rarely young people reach out to their parents' wide-ranging networks. Most experienced professionals enjoy helping new grads. However, if such contacts result in a job offer, don't feel pressured to accept work that doesn't appeal to you just because the potential employer is an important client or close friend of your parents.

Obviously, your network also should include fellow students, co-workers, teachers and friends.

Be open to jobs outside your field of interest. Every job provides opportunities for gathering resume-building skills and experiences, whether it's learning how things are done in a large corporate environment, how to participate in a meeting, how to work with a boss or how to disagree with someone without alienating them.

Be persistent but realistic. The job that you secure now may not be the amazing, super-cool job you really want. Be prepared to make trade-offs – there is still value in a job that helps you pay your student loan or allows you to save money to fund an overseas trip. Also, remember that no job is perfect, but each job provides some opportunities. Think in terms of life as a series of chapters – a not-so-great transition job is simply the first chapter of your work life. It's up to you to make it a steppingstone to a more satisfying second chapter.

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