

Finding the Right Career

How to Choose or Change Career Paths and Find Job Satisfaction



Whether you're just leaving school, finding opportunities limited in your current position or, like many in this economy, facing unemployment, it may be time to re-consider your career path. By learning how to research options, realize your strengths, and acquire new skills, as well as muster up the courage to make a change, you can discover the career that's right for you. Even if you're trapped in a position you don't love, with no realistic opportunity for change, there are still ways to find more joy and satisfaction in how you earn a living.

Why is finding meaningful work important?

Since so much of our time is spent either at work, traveling to and from work, or thinking about work, it inevitably plays a huge role in our lives. If you feel bored or unsatisfied with how you spend large parts of the day, it can take a serious toll on your physical and mental health. You may feel burned out and frustrated, anxious, depressed, or unable to enjoy time at home knowing that another workday lies ahead.

Having to concentrate for long periods on tasks you find mundane, repetitive, or unsatisfying can cause high levels of stress. What's more, if you don't find your work meaningful and rewarding, it's hard to generate the effort and enthusiasm necessary to advance in your job or career. As well as feeling happy and satisfied, you are far more likely to achieve success in an occupation that you feel passionate about.

So how do you gain satisfaction and meaning from your work?

You choose or change careers to something that you love and are passionate about.

Or:

You find purpose and joy in a job that you don't love.

When changing careers isn't a realistic option

For many of us, career dreams are just that: dreams. The practical realities of paying the bills, putting food on the table and the kids through school mean that you have to spend 40 hours every week doing a job that you don't enjoy. Or maybe you have to juggle multiple jobs, as well as school or family commitments, just to get by in today's economy. The idea of making a career change may seem about as realistic as choosing to become a professional athlete or an astronaut.

Still, getting up every morning dreading the thought of going to work, then staring at the clock all day willing it to be time to leave can take a real toll on your health. It can leave you feeling agitated, irritable, disillusioned, helpless, and completely worn out—even when you're not at work. In fact, having a monotonous or unfulfilling job can leave you just as vulnerable to stress and [burnout](#) as having one that keeps you rushed off your feet, and it can be just as harmful to your overall mental health as being unemployed.

Try to find some value in your role. Even in some mundane jobs, you can often focus on how your position helps others, for example, or provides a much needed product or service. Focus on aspects of the job that you do enjoy—even if it's just chatting with your coworkers at lunch. Changing your attitude towards your job can help you regain a sense of purpose and control.

Find balance in your life. If your job or career isn't what you want, find meaning and satisfaction elsewhere: in your family, hobbies, or after work interests, for example. Try to be grateful for having work that pays the bills and focus on the parts of your life that bring you joy. Having a vacation or fun weekend activities to look forward to can make a real difference in your working day.

Volunteer—at work and outside of work. Every boss appreciates an employee who volunteers for a new project. Undertaking new tasks and learning new skills at work can help prevent boredom and improve your resume. [Volunteering outside of work](#) can improve your self-confidence, stave off depression, and even provide you with valuable work experience and contacts in your area of interest.

Make friends at work. Having strong ties in the workplace can help reduce monotony and avoid burnout. Having friends to chat and joke with during the day can help relieve the stress of an unfulfilling job, improve your job performance, or simply get you through a rough day.

Consider the following steps in this article about planning a career change. Even if it's a dream that you're unable to act on at present, having a plan for *someday* in the future (when the economy picks up, the kids have grown up, or after you've retired, for example) can help you feel energized and hopeful, and better able to cope with present difficulties. Simply sending out resumes and [networking](#) can make you feel empowered. Also, making a career change can seem far more attainable when there's no time pressure and you break down the process into smaller, manageable steps.

Discovering new possibilities

Whether you're embarking on your first career out of school or looking to make a career change, the first step is to think carefully about what really drives you. You might find it hard to get past thinking about "what pays the most" or "what is most secure," especially in today's economy. But the truth is, most employees rank job satisfaction above salary in ensuring they feel happy at work. So, unless you're in a situation where you have to take the first available job to make ends meet, it's important to focus on your primary interests and passions. This can open doors to careers that you might not have considered. Once you have that foundation, you can start fine tuning your search for the right career. You may be surprised at how you can fit your passions into a new career.

Exploring your career opportunities

- **Focus on the things you love to do.** What have you dreamed of doing in the past? What do you naturally enjoy doing? Jot down what comes to mind, no matter how improbable it seems.
- **Look for clues everywhere.** Take note of projects or topics that stir your compassion or excite your imagination. Reflect on stories of people you admire. Ask yourself why certain activities make you happy, and pay attention to times when you are really enjoying yourself.
- **Be patient.** Remember that your search may take some time and you might have to go down a few different roads before finding the right career path. Time and introspection will help you identify the activities you most enjoy and that bring you true satisfaction.

Overcoming obstacles to career fulfillment

It's always challenging to consider a huge change in your life, and there may be many reasons why you think changing careers is not possible. Here are some common obstacles with tips on how to overcome them:

It's too much work to change careers. Where would I ever begin? Changing careers does require a substantial time investment. However, remember that it does not happen all at once. If you sit down and map out a rough plan of attack, breaking down larger tasks into smaller ones, it is a lot more manageable than you think. And if the payoff is a happier, more successful career, it's worth it.

I'm too old to change careers. I need to stay where I am. If you have worked for a number of years, you may feel that you've put too much time and effort into your career to change midstream. Or you may be concerned about retirement and health benefits. However, the more you've worked, the more likely you are to have skills that can transfer to a new career. Even if you are close to receiving a pension or other benefits, you can start to plan now for a career transition after retirement.

I don't have enough skills to consider a new career. You may be unaware of the skills you have, or low self-esteem may lead you to underestimate your marketability. Either way, you probably have more skills than you think. Consider skills you've learned not only from your job but also from hobbies, volunteering, or other life experiences. And gaining skills is not an all-or-nothing proposition. You can volunteer once a week or take a night class to move forward, for example, without quitting your current job.

In this economy, I'm lucky to have a job. I don't want to rock the boat. In today's climate, it might feel like too much of a risk to consider changing careers. However, if you're unhappy in your current job, researching other options will only benefit you in the long run. You may discover a career with a more stable, long-term outlook than your current career, for example. And you don't have to quit your current job until you are confident of your new career path.

What if I've already lost my job?

Being [unemployed](#) or underemployed can be tremendously stressful. It can increase the pressure of meeting mortgage payments, rent, and other financial obligations. You may feel ashamed for not working, or feel that the loss of your job has stripped you of your identity, both at home and at work. This is especially true if you have worked in the same field for a very long time.

However, unemployment can also have a bright side. It gives you the chance to reflect on your career path. If you've been considering a new field, now is the time to research the options and see what might be the right fit for you. You may end up in a much stronger position than if you had originally kept your job.

Finding the right career tip 1: Identify occupations that match your interests

So how do you translate your interests into a new career? With a little research, you may be surprised at the careers that relate to many of the things you love.

Career tests

Different online tools can guide you through the process of self-discovery. Questions, quizzes, and personality assessments can't tell you what your perfect career would be, but they can help you identify what's important to you in a career, what you enjoy doing, and where you excel. One example, frequently used by universities and the U.S. government, is the RIASEC/Holland interest scale. It outlines six common personality types, such as investigative, social, or artistic, and enables you to browse sample careers based on the type of personality you most identify with.

Researching specific careers

If you have narrowed down some specific jobs or careers, you can find a wealth of information online, from description of positions to average salaries and estimated future growth. This will also help you figure out the practical priorities: How stable is the field you are considering? Are you comfortable with the amount of risk? Is the salary range acceptable to you? What about commute distances? Will you have to relocate for training or a new job? Will the new job affect your family?

Get support and information from others

While you can glean a lot of information from research and quizzes, there's no substitute for information from someone currently working in your chosen career. Talking to someone in the field gives you a real sense of the type of work you will actually be doing and if it meets your expectations. What's more, you will start to build connections in your new career area, helping you land a job in the future. Does approaching others like this seem intimidating? It doesn't have to be. [Networking](#) and informational interviewing are important skills that can greatly further your career.

You may also consider career counseling or a job coach, especially if you are considering a major career shift. Sometimes impartial advice from others can open up possibilities you hadn't considered.

Tip 2: Evaluate your strengths and skills

Once you have a general idea of your career path, take some time to figure out what skills you have and what skills you need. Remember, you're not completely starting from scratch—you already have some skills to start. These skills are called *transferable skills*, and they can be applied to almost any field. Some examples include:

- management and leadership experience
- communication (both written and oral)
- research and program planning
- public speaking
- conflict resolution and mediation
- managing your time effectively
- computer literacy
- foreign language fluency

What are my transferable career skills?

To discover your transferable career skills, consider the following:

Don't limit yourself to just your experiences at work. When you are thinking about your skills, consider all types of activities including volunteering, hobbies, and life experiences. For example, even if you don't have formal leadership or program planning experience, founding a book club or organizing a toy drive are ways that you have been putting these skills into practice.

List your accomplishments that might fit. Don't worry about formatting these skills for a resume at this point. You just want to start thinking about the skills you have. It can be a tremendous confidence booster to realize all of the talents you've developed.

Brainstorm with trusted friends, colleagues, or mentors. They may be able to identify transferable skills you've overlooked or help you better articulate these skills in the future.

Tip 3: Develop your skills and experience

If your chosen career requires skills or experience you lack, don't despair. There are many ways to gain needed skills. While learning, you'll also have an opportunity to find out whether or not you truly enjoy your chosen career and also make connections that could lead to your dream job.

How can I gain new career skills?

Utilize your current position. Look for on-the-job training or opportunities to work on projects that develop new skills. See if your employer will pay part of your tuition costs.

Identify resources in the community. Find out about programs in your community. Community colleges or libraries often offer low cost opportunities to strengthen skills such as computing, basic accounting, or business development. Local chambers of commerce, small business administrations, or state job development programs are also excellent resources.

Take classes. Some fields require specific education or skills, such as an additional degree or specific training. Don't automatically rule out more education as impossible. Many fields have accelerated programs if you already have some education, or you may be able to take night classes or complete part-time schooling so that you can continue to work. Some companies even offer tuition reimbursements if you stay at the company after you finish your education.

Volunteer or work as an intern. Some career skills can be acquired by [volunteering](#) or completing an internship. This has the added benefit of getting you in contact with people in your chosen field.

Tip 4: Consider starting your own business

If you're getting worn down by a long commute or a difficult boss, the thought of working for yourself can be very appealing. And even in a slower economy, it's still possible to find your perfect niche. Depending on the specialty, some companies prefer to streamline their ranks and work with outside vendors. However, it is especially important to do your homework and understand the realities of business ownership before you jump in.

Make sure you are committed to and passionate about your business idea. You will be spending many long hours getting started, and it may take a while for your business to pay off.

Research is critical. Take some time to analyze your area of interest. Are you filling an unmet need? Especially if you are considering an online business, how likely is your area to be outsourced? What is your business plan, and who are your potential investors?

Expect limited or no earnings to start. Especially in the first few months, you are building your base and may have start-up costs that offset any initial profit. Make sure you have a plan on how to cope during this period.

Tip 5: Manage your career transition

Pace yourself and don't take on too much at once. Career change doesn't happen overnight, and it is easy to get overwhelmed with all the steps to successfully make the transition. However, you will get there with commitment and motivation. Break down large goals into smaller ones, and try to accomplish at least one small thing a day to keep the momentum going.

Ease slowly into your new career. Take time to network, volunteer, and even work part-time in your new field before committing fully. It will not only make for an easier transition, but you will have time to ensure that you are on the right path and make any necessary changes before working full-time in your new field.

Take care of yourself. You might be feeling so busy with the career transition that you barely have time to sleep or eat. However, [managing stress](#), eating right, and taking time for sleep, exercise, and loved ones will ensure you have the stamina for the big changes ahead.

Where to turn for help

In the U.S., [Employment & Training Administration](#) provides information about federal job training programs in the U.S. (US Department of Labor)

In the UK, [National Careers Service](#) offers training and careers advice.

In Australia, [Career Information](#) offers resources and career guidance.

In Canada, [Education and training benefits](#) offers information on grants and links to explore career options.

Recommended reading

[More than job satisfaction](#) - How to create value in any job. (APA)

[10 Tools to Create and Maintain Job Satisfaction](#) - Tips for finding satisfaction in your job. (Psychology Today)

[Transferable Skills List](#) - To help you market yourself to employers and identify gaps where you might need more training. (About Careers)

[The 10 step plan to career change](#) - Checklist of areas to review in changing careers.

HelpGuide

(Quintessential Careers)

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