

The Top 10 Steps for Choosing a Career

Category: Careers (AB6)

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Career choices may well be more difficult today than at any time in history, for three reasons: there is infinitely more to choose from; career definitions are more fluid and changing; and the levels of expectation are rising. Most men and women entering the workforce today can expect to change careers three or more times during their working lives. Here are ten steps that will help ensure that your choices are good ones.

1. **Begin with your values.**

What's really important to you? What turns you on? What do you like to do so much that you would almost feel guilty getting paid to do it? These questions are designed to help you get at one of the key elements in career choice: values. Your values are the emotional anchor of all that you do. Satisfying careers are built upon the notion of a high correspondence between one's personal values and the work they will be doing. Begin your career search by sorting out your values and writing them down as clearly and succinctly as you can.

2. **Identify your skills and talents.**

A skill is something you've learned to do. A talent is something you've been born with, or at least that you seem naturally qualified to do. It's important to recognize the difference between the two. You may be skilled at something and still not find it interesting. Chances are, however, if you are naturally talented at something, there will be a correspondence between that particular talent and your values. Put another way: you are more apt to enjoy doing what you do well naturally than what you have simply been taught to do.

3. **Identify your preferences.**

From early on, we approach the world with certain personal preferences--how we perceive others, how we think and make decisions, whether we prefer concepts over people or vice versa, and the extent to which we are comfortable with uncertainty in our lives. For many, these preferences operate at a subconscious level, but they strongly influence the way we function with others. Some questions may help: Do you regard yourself as highly intuitive? Are you outgoing or reserved? When faced with a decision, do you rely primarily on facts or feelings? Your answers to these questions can tell you much about the kinds of work you will find interesting and challenging. One way of sorting this all out is by taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator a self-assessing instrument that helps clarify these issues. If you haven't taken it in the past year, or at all,

I strongly recommend that you take it and include your results in your career deliberations.

4. Experiment.

There's no substitute for experience, the more the better. It's probably safe to say that nearly every career looks vastly different from the outside than from within. If you're new to the job market or if you are considering a career change, get out and talk to people who are actually doing it. Take a job in the field or industry and see for yourself if it's really all you thought it would be. And don't rely on a single authority or work experience. Within the bounds of the area you've picked, try to get as much and as varied experience as you can. If you're committed to finding out about a certain career, you may want to consider volunteering in order to gain work experience. That way, you'll be able to test out whether it fits your values and preferences. If you aren't getting paid to do it, chances are you won't stay with it unless you like it.

5. Become broadly literate.

In this high tech information world, there is an incredible pressure to specialize, to know more and more about less and less. That's dangerous, because it increases your chances of being obsolescent immensely. Many people lose their jobs and scuttle their careers because they have gradually developed tunnel vision about who and what they are and what their capabilities are. The old debate over specialist versus generalist is being tempered by a new term: the generalist/specialist. That's the individual who has been able to grasp the large picture while, at the same time, becoming expert on several of its parts. That's what becoming broadly literate is all about. Learn as much as you can about what interests you and about the jobs and careers you're considering--not just what those involved are currently doing, but about where the industry or profession is heading.

6. In your first job, opt for experience first, money second.

If you're at the top of your class graduating summa cum laude, you may be able to combine both in a single package, but for most new entrants into the workforce, it's a matter of priorities. A good way of sizing up several opportunities is to ask yourself: "Which position will offer me the best chance of becoming excellent at what I do?" And that may not be the one that pays the highest initial salary.

7. Aim for a job in which you can become 110% committed.

Modest dedication and average performance are unacceptable today. The problem is, with downsizing becoming fully acceptable you aren't likely to discover the truth of that statement until you're out of a job! So, how to protect yourself? If you aren't able to commit 110% to what you are currently doing, start NOW to find something in which you can.

8. Build your lifestyle around your income, not your expectations.

Recruiters are famous for courting desirable applicants with promises such as: "Why, in two years, you could be making X thousands of dollars". The problem is that many new entrants into the job force buy into this line and begin living as though they were making the kind of money promised in two years. A better way is to begin, right with your first job, to structure your lifestyle in such a manner that you can put away ten percent of every paycheck. Starting early and investing regularly and wisely are probably two of the greatest secrets of wealth accumulation.

9. Invest five percent of your time, energy, and money into furthering your career.

In terms of a forty-hour week, that's only two hours per week. The point is, you cannot rely on your employer to spoon feed you. Employers today are oriented towards immediate returns on their dollar. They will invest in you only when they can see an immediate or relatively quick expensive benefit, or when they see extraordinary potential. Better to not count on either. Dedicate yourself to getting ahead by keeping ahead, and you do that by controlling the one thing you can control: your dedication to being the best that you can be.

10. Be willing to change and adapt.

If you re-read the preceding steps in this list, you'll note an absence (refreshing, I hope) of emphasis upon goal-setting and a substitution instead, of words like "values", "skills", "talents", and "preferences". It's not that goals aren't useful, but rather that they should emerge naturally from these other factors and, even though you may write them down and paste them on your mirror, they should not obscure the need to be willing to change and adapt to new conditions, your own growth, and developing opportunities. The distinction here is between "direction" and "plan". An ant has a direction, but not a plan. The ant knows where it wants to go and is willing to turn around, back up, and change course in order to get there. But the ant hasn't written it down, posted it on a bulletin board, or gained concurrence from all the other ants. The ant just knows, with absolute certainty, the general direction in which it's heading and that it WILL get there. That's what modern day career direction is all about.

About the Submitter

This piece was originally submitted by Shale Paul, Executive Coach, who can be reached at shale@shalecoach.com, or visited on the [web](#). Shale Paul wants you to know: I work with individuals who are committed to getting ahead, changing direction, or simply growing! The original source is: Written by Shale Paul. Copyright 1996, Coach University. May be reproduced or transmitted if done so in its entirety, including this copyright line.