



7 Tips for Tracking Down Your Dream Career

Choosing a career is tough. Whether you're a new grad or considering a career change, it's easy to feel overwhelmed when tasked with selecting your next gig. And why shouldn't it? It's an enormously costly decision, in terms of both time and money. In many cases, it defines your lifestyle: it determines where you live, how you spend your time and what you can afford. It has influence over your stress levels and your general happiness. It's a big deal and, to complicate matters further, there are over 10,000 options to choose from—even Barbie has had 130 different careers over the years!

The reality is that it's difficult to get a feel for any one career without—you know—actually experiencing it yourself. Even if you have a shortlist of careers that you're interested in, your idea of what those jobs entail is likely based on preconceived notions. Unless you have a friend or a family member working in a similar field, your idea of what any given job looks like in practice might be unrealistic (e.g., being a lawyer is less glamorous than it appears in that Netflix series, and being a chef has crazier hours than that article lets on). This lack of information might seem innocent enough, but it can have some serious consequences—you may be ruling out your dream job without even knowing it.

The good news? There are plenty of creative ways you can familiarize yourself with your career options before having to sink major time and money into them. Experience may be the best teacher, but some targeted research doesn't hurt. If you're feeling stuck in a career-decision-making rut, pick out a few of the practices below to spark some interest and to build momentum in your search:

Quiz yourself (but not too seriously)

Personality quizzes and aptitude tests can be helpful in starting your career search, as long as you're realistic about their results. These tests are more about self-assessment than they are about career matchmaking, so use them as guided self-reflection, rather than as a fortune-teller. Question by question, personality tests can show you where your priorities lie, what sort of environments you thrive in and where you fit into a team—all of which will serve you well when considering future courses of study and work.

A wide range of career placement tests (both free and paid) are offered online, in schools and through community programs. If you're currently a student, check with your school counselor to see if any career guidance options are already available to you. Local libraries and post-secondary institutions may also be helpful in providing or locating career-related resources.

Shop the course catalog

This is a great exercise to get the wheels turning and to brainstorm some options. Pick up a college course catalog (or scroll through a PDF version online) and highlight any degrees and courses that sound interesting to you. Don't overthink it—the logistics will come later. Just use

the catalog as an opportunity to see what you naturally gravitate toward. It doesn't matter whether or not you plan to actually attend that particular school—or any school, for that matter. Were the courses you selected aligned with your interests? Were there any surprises on the list? Generate some potential job titles from the areas of study you highlighted and see if that generates new leads in your career search. If you're feeling especially inspired, reach out to professors or department heads with any questions you have about the field.

Fill your calendar

If your eyes are glazing over from scrolling through pages and pages of search results, try a little in-person research instead! Make a point of attending info sessions, conferences, Q&As, meet-ups, job fairs and even free lectures in the fields you're interested in. Ask questions and chat with the other attendees—learning from others' experiences can be a valuable way to inform your own path.

Browse those blogs

Course catalogs and online job descriptions are great, but they tend to gloss over the mundane (or even ugly) aspects of any given job. For this reason, it's important to seek out information from a wide range of sources. Industry forums, discussion boards and personal blogs will provide different perspectives on careers you're interested in: industry forums and discussion boards can highlight current trends and issues the field is facing, and personal blogs can shed some light on what a lifestyle in a given career can look like.

Hashtag help

Why stop your search at personal blogs? Go deep by taking your career search to various social media platforms. A hashtag could be your key to discovering an entire online community of people who share in your career dreams. Much like scoping out personal blogs, social media posts may help round out your mental image of what it means to work in a certain field. Potential new contacts, resources and mentors could be just one Instagram, Twitter or Facebook hashtag away!

Be brave and reach out

Your research will inevitably lead you to discovering career role models. Maybe they gave a presentation at the conference you attended, maybe you stumbled upon a helpful YouTube tutorial they made, or maybe you've spent hours reading their blog posts. Be brave and reach out to them—acknowledge their contributions, thank them for their positive influence, and test the waters by asking those career questions that you just can't seem to find the answer to anywhere else. If the advice you're looking for can't be provided in a simple email, request their time—see if there's potential for a phone call, a Skype chat, or a quick consultation over coffee. Worst-case scenario: nothing changes. Best-case scenario: you solidify your career goals and gain a mentor in the process.

Be generous with your time

Keep your eye out for volunteer, internship or job-shadowing opportunities that will allow you to learn more about the careers you're interested in. Even if your volunteer duties don't have much crossover with your dream job, the opportunity will give you a chance to observe some of the more nuanced aspects of a career and rack up some resumé boosters along the way. You may even develop some new skills and connect with future colleagues and mentors.