Wadsworth’s

Quick Guide

to Career Planning

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# Wadsworth’s Quick Guide to Career Planning

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Whether you have been in the workforce for a while or are just starting out, planning your career and searching for a job can be overwhelming.

Keep in mind that no career has to be a permanent decision. The work world is no longer about joining a company at age twenty-one and retiring from that company at age sixty-five. In fact, Americans average between six to ten different jobs (usually at different companies) in their work lifetimes (Gilman, 1997). If in six months or six years you decide to make a change, do it. Make the best decision you can for now and be willing to revisit that decision regularly. Most people change jobs—and often careers—many times in their lives.

At the same time, you don’t want to start a career without some planning. After all, your job will consume eight to ten hours of your day, more time than you will spend with your spouse or children. If you don’t like your career, you can change it, but a job search is a time-consuming hassle that you want to do only occasionally. So be thoughtful about your career choice, and do the research you need to do to make the most informed decision possible.

Finally, know what your options are, if you have any. Do you have the financial resources to delay your job search until you’ve taken a much-deserved break? Can you save or borrow money in order to travel, do volunteer work, or just catch up on your sleep for a while? If you must begin working immediately after college, think about whether you need to get a “real”
job right away, or if you can manage with a short-term summer job while you clear your head and think about your goals. Are you returning to full-time employment in the same company after a break to take some college courses? In that case, your career path, at least in the short term, is set. However, you can use this guide to review your career choices, plan your next job, or make a career change, if you need one.

✔️ How Do I Decide What to Do?

Some people know exactly what they want to do. They started college by enrolling in business and economics courses with the goal of a business degree and a job at XYZ Corporation. Others always knew they wanted to use their language skills and travel the world. They may not have identified an exact job, but their interests have helped them narrow the search to a few professions: international travel, the Peace Corps, or foreign language teaching. Still others, and that includes most college graduates, really aren’t sure what they want to do after college. Whether your major is in the sciences and engineering or in the liberal arts, you have unlimited possibilities in the world of work. Maybe you don’t even know where to start your search.

Know Your Values

The best way to begin your career planning process is to explore what you value. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it more important to you to make something or to do something?
Do you want a job that allows you to help people?
Do you want to manage money or do you prefer to have nothing to do with finances?
Do you like working with people or with machines?
Do you want to work for a large company or a small one?
How important is location to you?
Are you willing to commute a long way to work?
Are you willing to relocate?
How many hours per week are you willing to devote to your job?
How many leisure hours do you need?
How much money do you need or want to make?
Are you willing to go through several years of further training for your job?
Is job stability important?
Do you want to be in a creative career?

One useful exercise is to create a personal vision of what you hope to be like in five years (Gilman, 1997). When you imagine the best possible future for yourself, what will it be? Who will be the people in your life? Where will you live? What kind of work will you be doing? What will your responsibilities be at work and at home?

Learn about Yourself

If you aren’t sure what your values and preferences are, consider taking an aptitude test or a personality inventory. Your career center may offer these. You can also find these tests online, although it’s best to work with a counselor who can interpret the results for you. You can also turn to books designed to help you find your career passion. The best known of these is Richard Bolles’ *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Inventories, like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, will assess your preferences—what
you like and dislike about many facets of life. Aptitude tests will help you identify your skills and strengths, which you can then match with potential career fields. It’s a good idea to do both personality inventories and aptitude tests and cross-reference them. After all, you really don’t want to do a job that you’re good at but ultimately hate because it doesn’t fit your personality.

Identify Your Skills

Before you begin sending out résumés and interviewing for jobs, make a list of your many skills. In general, you can break your skills into three categories: content skills, transferable skills, and soft skills.

*Content skills* are those that give you unique and specific knowledge or ability. Can you repair cars? Do you have a pilot’s license? Have you been trained as a court stenographer? Are you an excellent cook? Usually a content skill applies best to a particular occupation although it can sometimes be useful in other professions.

*Transferable skills* are more general. They apply, or transfer, well to many potential occupations. Examples of transferable skills are: keyboarding, writing, public speaking, selling, investigating, speaking American sign language, and analyzing. These skills are valuable to any employer and are important to highlight in a résumé, cover letter, and interview.

*Soft skills* are fundamental work and lifestyle skills that make you a good employee. These include punctuality, a neat appearance, courtesy, honesty, integrity, and self-discipline. Some people naturally have good soft skills, but most of us develop them over time. We learn them from
role models, teachers, and employers. Job training programs emphasize soft skills, because employers look for them in all of their applicants. Soft skills make working easier and less stressful and ensure that you’ll keep your job longer.

Make a list of all of your skills, even the ones that seem obvious (such as “I am almost always on time for appointments.”). Working with an advisor, decide which ones belong on your résumé and which you should emphasize in your cover letter, in an interview, or simply in your demeanor.

**Research Career Options**

Now that you know what your skills and inclinations are, research the types of occupations you think you might enjoy. Start with some general research to learn more about the many type of careers that exist. Which occupations are hot right now? What do experts predict will be the hot jobs in ten years? Which industries are hiring and which ones are laying off workers? In which professions do people express the most satisfaction?

Once you’ve made a list of a few appealing careers, find out more about them. Which of these industries is active in your area, or in the area in which you hope to live? What are the biggest companies in these industries? How successful are they? How do employees rate their job satisfaction? What are salaries like?

You can find a lot of useful career information through the reference department of your local or campus library. A good starting point is the Occupational Outlook
Handbook, published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Your library probably has a copy and you can view it online at http://www.bls.gov/oco/. The OOH provides information about salaries, working conditions, required training, and job prospects for hundreds of professions, from accountants to zoologists. Also check out JobWeb, the web site of the National Association of Colleges and Employers: http://www.jobweb.com/joboutlook/default.htm. JobWeb helps you connect your major to compatible careers. At their web site you can also view the 10 fastest growing occupations of the decade.

**Link Your Major and Your Career**

If you have chosen a major such as nursing, accounting, or elementary education, you probably plan to work in that field. However, that isn’t always the case. Don’t be afraid to take an open-minded approach to your career. After all, four years of studying education may have convinced you that you definitely do not want to teach! In that case, consider how you can apply what you’ve learned in a different profession. Your education degree would be an advantage in many professions, including librarian, editor, and writer. You can use your nursing degree to launch a career in a related medical field, in social work, or in medical sales. If you’re having qualms about the degree you’ve chosen, talk with an advisor or counselor about how to reach your career goals.

Liberal arts majors, especially English, history, and philosophy majors, may worry that they aren’t preparing themselves for the work world. In actuality, there are plenty of jobs for liberal arts grads. It really is true that the skills
you’ve acquired in critical thinking, communication, and writing will serve you well. Of course, a liberal arts degree is always welcome in such professions as teaching, publishing, advertising, and the various media. But you can apply your degree to more technical fields as well, in departments such as human resources, marketing, technical writing, and public relations.

Remember that the people who are interviewing you for entry-level positions at high tech companies probably didn’t major in computer science themselves—many of them graduated from college before the personal computer came onto the scene. Very likely the managers you will meet have degrees in the liberal arts, communication, or business. They will appreciate where you are coming from.

Finally, remember that many people choose careers that are in no way related to their college majors. Art history majors become plumbers and physics majors become musicians. If you have a special talent, such as the ability to sing or play an instrument, a gift for fixing things, or unique athletic ability, you may want to create a career that allows you to use that talent. A college degree is important as a foundation for life, but it doesn’t have to be the basis for your occupation.

✔ **Career Planning Resources**

**The Career Center**

The career center on your campus is a valuable resource that you should use regularly during your career planning process and job search. This office can help you research careers, locate available jobs, build a résumé, and prepare for job interviews (Moock, 1996). Your career
The career center may also be able to administer personality inventories, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and aptitude tests.

Counselors in the career center are there to help you bridge the gap between college and career. No question is too small or too strange. Keep in mind that once you’ve graduated or left college, such consultation will be expensive. Take advantage of this free resource.

**Job Fairs and On-campus Interviews**

Most colleges offer job fairs once or twice a year. Typically at a job fair, a dozen or more employers will set up booths and invite interested students to collect information, talk informally with a company representative, and drop off a résumé. On some large campuses, each job fair may be targeted to particular majors or careers (such as the allied health fields of nursing, medical technicians, etc.). It’s important to visit job fairs even if the list of participating companies doesn’t excite you. You never know when you’ll meet an important contact. Job fairs are also a research tool; visiting them gives you a risk-free opportunity to learn more about a field. It’s possible that you’ll discover that registered nurse, not x-ray technician, is the right job for you.

On-campus interviews occur when employers visit the college to talk with students interested in working in their companies after graduation. Your career center will probably coordinate the on-campus interviews. Find out from them when interviews in careers that interest you will occur and get on the list for as many as possible. Every campus has its own procedures for matching student applicants with interviews. You may have to compete with
other students, undergo a screening process, or have certain materials (such as a résumé) ready to go before the career center will allow you to participate in on-campus interviews. Don’t be afraid to ask to interview in several career fields. Unless you’ve decided firmly what you want to do after college, you’ll benefit from keeping an open mind at this point. However, if the courses you’ve taken don’t qualify you for a position, don’t expect to be allowed to interview for it. For example, if you’re a history major and you’ve taken no engineering courses, don’t sign up for interviews with an engineering firm.

Internships, Volunteer Work, and Part-time and Summer Jobs

Working while you’re in college is a great way to learn more about potential careers. Whether you’re getting paid or not, you’ll gain valuable experience and make a contribution. Again, your career center is a good place to start looking for internships and jobs. Your financial aid office may also know of opportunities. If you can afford to do so, it’s better to volunteer in a field that interests you, such as affordable housing or gerontology, than to flip burgers for minimum wage. Talk with your financial aid officer; he or she may be able to help you bridge the financial gap.

Networking

Networking involves developing chains or webs of individuals who can advise you on careers and connect you with potential employers. The purpose of networking is not to interview for a job. Do not approach the people in your network about employment. If a job comes from the networking, you are lucky. The purposes of networking are
to learn more about a career, to make professional contacts, and to explore your options.

Although everyone’s networks are different, most college students can count on their parents, professors, campus mentors, friends, and alumni as starting points for networking (Moock, 1996). It’s important to keep several networks active, since you can’t predict which will lead to a career planning breakthrough, or even a job.

Start with your family. Ask your parents (or grown children) who they know in the industries you’re considering. Are you studying accounting? Ask your working family members to recommend a CPA that they know, or have hired, who may be willing to talk with you about his or her career path.

Your college instructors, especially those in your major, can also be terrific contacts. If you are majoring in computer information systems and you hope to land a job in a high tech firm, talk with your professors about your interests. Chances are that they have contacts in industry who will be willing to talk with you.

Friends will have had jobs in your area of interest or will know someone who has. Tap your career center’s alumni lists for graduates who have volunteered to speak with students. Don’t forget, too, about organizations you belong to: fraternities, sororities, clubs, churches, and hobbies.

Remember, you are not approaching these people about giving you a job. If you ask them if they will talk with you about any potential job openings in their company, chances are they will decline to meet with you.
(because they have no immediate openings). However, if you request an informational meeting with them, they will probably say yes. People love to talk about themselves; you will be surprised how enthusiastically people will talk with you about their careers.

Keep a written list or a spreadsheet of all of your networking contacts. Follow up on all phone conversations or in-person meetings with a thank you note. Be sure to keep your network members in the loop when you’ve established contact with someone they recommended. And let them know when and where you have found employment, so they can stay in touch (Moock, 1996).

✔️ **Planning Your Career Search**

If you aren’t in your last year of college, you still have plenty of time for your career search. While you should be thinking about potential careers from the first year, it is only when you choose a major that you have to think seriously about life after college. As you approach your final year, you should begin your career planning in earnest.

It’s a good idea to spread the career planning process over an entire year. After all, there is a lot to do. You must narrow your search to a few appealing fields. For each field, you should do some research that will allow you to identify potential employers. You will need a résumé and a standard cover letter that you can customize for any job you apply for. You may have to gather materials (such as transcripts and a list of references) and arrange to take exams like the GRE, MCAT, or LSAT.

Here’s a helpful timeline to follow in your last year of college (Moock, 1996):
September/October: Visit your college’s career center. Get information on aptitude tests and personality inventories as well as scheduled job fairs, graduate school exams, and on-campus interviewing opportunities.

November: Draft a copy of your résumé and a sample cover letter. Get feedback from the career center on these documents.

December: Finalize the résumé and cover letter. Spend time over the holiday break doing some online or library research in the careers that interest you.

January: Begin networking. Make a list of the networks you will use (family, instructors, former employers) and start contacting them. If you are considering going into a trade, such as carpentry or plumbing, contact your local union for more information about how to become an apprentice in that field. Find out what is required to obtain union membership. Ask the union representative to give you a list of contacts in the trade who can advise you.

February/March: Begin participating in on-campus interviews. Send out cover letters and résumés to companies that interest you for post-graduation employment.

April/May: Focus on the companies and job opportunities that interest you most. Actively pursue interviews with these companies. Continue to network. If no long-term job looks likely, plan what you will do immediately after graduation. If you will need a job right away, begin looking for a summer or temporary job.
References


Web Sites

Best Career Web Sites for College Students: http://www.careerplanningresources.com/links_for_college_students.htm
