

Selecting your best career

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In my last column, I explained how to focus your career direction by taking stock of work values, skills, interests, knowledge and personality style. This evaluation process will help lead you to a fulfilling job.

In most cases, once you've identified your inner needs for job satisfaction, the hard work is done. Now you're left with a variety of job titles that can suit those needs. For example, a nurse's aide, a chiropractor's assistant or a hospital patient representative may all satisfy your need to be in a care-giving, health-related job.

The next challenge is to research those job titles and discover if the actual day-to-day work is what you've imagined. Somehow, your vision of the perfect job must fit the facts of the everyday work world. The motto for this phase of the career development process is: "Look before you leap." Simply put, this means it's best to test the realities of your options first. What may seem like a glamorous position that's absolutely perfect for you may instead be utterly boring work.

Here are some tools for researching job titles:

- **Reading research:** This is the first step in gathering facts about each job title that interests you. You can find a wealth of information on the Internet as well as at the public and university libraries. Librarians enjoy helping people find information. Don't hesitate to ask them for specific books in your field of interest such as real estate, finance, health, etc. A trusted source of online information is called O*NET (The Occupational Information Network) (<http://online.onetcenter.org/>) O*NET is a database of occupational requirements and worker attributes. It describes occupations in terms of the skills and knowledge required, how the work is performed, and typical work settings. The Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH) gives you information regarding the training and education needed, earnings, expected job prospects, what workers do on the job, and working conditions. The OOH is available in print at your local library or online via the Bureau of Labor Statistics website (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/>).
- **Conversational research:** After you've saturated yourself with the written work, it's time to get information from "the horse's mouth." Seek out top producers,

experts in the field, a new guy on the block, or anyone who's well-versed in your desired position. It doesn't matter where you start. If you have trouble finding the perfect expert, start with someone in a related field. You'll find this process has a momentum of its own, and it propels you closer to your goal of a satisfying job. Besides that, it's fun. Your investigation will reveal how well you'll fit into the jobs you're considering.

If you find that a job isn't quite what you've imagined, go to your next job title. And, whenever possible, visit workers in their work place. You can sense an amazing array of intangibles by simply walking into the work environment. But remember, this is not a job interview, and you should never accept a position at this point. You're evaluating options now, not seeking work.

Here are some examples of effective questions for the job experts you visit:

- ◆ What are your job duties and overall job goals? Listen for skills required, responsibilities, expected results, etc.
 - ◆ What is a typical work week like? Listen for schedules, tasks, environmental factors.
 - ◆ What do you like or dislike about the job? Keep an open mind as you listen and remember these are their opinions and may not be yours.
 - ◆ How did you learn to do what you do? Identify the job requirements: certification, on-the-job training, "paying dues", formal training and education.
 - ◆ What is the expected range of pay and benefits? Encourage your expert to discuss not only salary, but also benefits, vacation, and professional development opportunities.
 - ◆ Where do you expect this field to be in the next five years? What's the job outlook and what new areas of the work are on the "cutting edge?"
 - ◆ Who is successful in this position and why? You always want another name for more research. This will also tell you some of the ingredients for success in the job.
- **Trying it on:** Sometimes it's worthwhile to get as close as possible to the actual job before making a career commitment. Here's how:
 - ◆ Hanging out with the job holder, or "shadowing" for a day is a good way to see what the job is really like.

- ◆ If you want some extended and authentic experience in your chosen field, volunteering is a way to sample it. It has other advantages as well. If you decide this is indeed the work for you, you'll be in a good position to be hired.
- ◆ For some positions, such as counselors, therapists and artists, interning is another excellent way to learn while you confirm your decision.
- ◆ Before going for it completely, a part-time job also will allow you to test the waters while holding onto current work. If it's a positive experience, you'll feel more secure about taking the plunge.

Obviously, there are no easy answers or guarantees. However, if you take the time to do an efficient and effective investigation and get some professional guidance along the way, you'll most likely find work that brings years of fulfillment. And that's worth a little effort. Isn't it?

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