

Work - starting a career - Q & A

This article lists a range of questions on starting a career which were posted by visitors to the Better Health Channel. Our experts provide the answers.

Q. My son is doing Year 11 and has no idea what he wants to do. How can I help him decide?

Most people I see in my counselling practice tell me they are 40 and still don't know what they want to do when they 'grow up'. Most adolescents don't know yet (and will probably have many changes of career throughout their lives), but the system requires them to make subject decisions that affect academic course options that impact on jobs and so on. This is why people often say 'select subjects that are more likely to keep your options open for the future', but that doesn't help much when you want to ensure that your son performs well in, and enjoys, Year 12.

He might find it helpful to explore the following questions. Then, make sure he visits his careers teacher to talk about careers, labour market projections and subject choices for Year 12. Useful questions include:

- What is he most interested in? Data, people, practical things, a combination?
- What comes most easily to him? Observe the skills and abilities that flow naturally.
- What retains his attention span?
- What is he passionate about?
- How is he different and similar to others in your family (for example, personality and occupations)?

Some students have obvious preferences and interests, and they can do some research into associated work that people will pay them to do. A few students have mapped out their trajectory in such detail they know exactly what job, and the university or TAFE they want to enrol in. Others have no idea, and are interested in either everything or nothing. If he is in the last category, he may find it helpful to eliminate things. Finding out what you don't want can often help you to identify elements of what you may want. Get information by attending Open Days, searching on the Internet, observing and talking to people in various careers, and examining lifestyles that best suit.

For comprehensive help, you may wish to seek specialist advice. The Yellow Pages and the web have lists of careers counsellors for students. Most are members of the Australian Association of Career Counsellors.

Q. I did my VCE last year and I wanted to get into architecture but I only got offers in TAFE courses. All my friends got into university and I've taken a semester off while I decide what to do. What's the difference between TAFE and university and am I selling myself short going to TAFE?

It can be incredibly disappointing when you don't get an offer for your desired course. You can feel the odd one out when all your friends get into university and you don't. Let's turn this around. You have an opportunity to explore new adventures that may lead to extraordinary career success. You may be able to zigzag back into your original preference later on. You might find that the other path you take might get you where you really want to go more effectively than a traditional path. You might prefer a different direction anyway.

The trick is to try things and see where you shine and what you are passionate about. Some people try an allied job. Others may find that too painful and go for something completely different. In retrospect, a lot of people are relieved they didn't get into their preferred course.

You never sell yourself short going to TAFE. In fact, many people actually prefer to attend TAFE for vocational skills and practical industry experience. I have lectured at most universities and several institutes of TAFE. A high calibre of teaching and learning occurs at both. Particular TAFE institutions can be favoured by the work world for particular courses. The same holds for universities. Different employers may have a different bias for different institutions. Seize your opportunity to gain qualifications in an area that you are interested in, show aptitude for, and expect there will be labour market demand. Most employers hire expertise, not an educational address.

Q. I'm studying web design and I know it's a competitive field. One of my mother's friends suggested that I'd be wise to do some volunteer work with an agency in order to get a job in the field but I'm afraid they'll treat me as less of a skilled worker because they don't pay me. What do you think?

When you wish to enter a competitive field, you need to gain an edge. Potential is not enough. Experience is gold. Take the opportunity, but put some parameters around it so that you don't feel used.

This is a mutually beneficial arrangement. Check the legal requirements (for example, WorkCover) and contract for a set period. Since it is voluntary, you can voluntarily leave if the agency treats you inappropriately. However, bear in mind that any professional role includes some dreary bits. If you really want to get into this field, you will need to tolerate a range of tasks. Show enthusiasm, contribute ideas, and be willing to go the extra distance. It would be difficult for an agency to devalue a motivated, dynamic contributor who is eager to learn. Who knows, you might even create a paying job for yourself.

Q. I have just completed a social work degree, but I'm unsure about finding work in this field. I wish to work with children, but I'm finding it difficult locating a job in this area. What do you suggest I do?

It is disappointing when you graduate in your field of choice and discover that employment prospects are low at this time.

Explore all possible networks

It's important to build professional networks and seek assistance from your university. If you haven't already done so, join the relevant professional association(s). Go along to the meetings and volunteer for a committee. This gives you a chance to demonstrate your skills and interest. You may also find that you can organise some observations or shadowing of practitioners.

Return to your university and contact former lecturers and the careers service. Check the library or careers service to discover the results of recent GCCA Destination Surveys for graduates. Check with your careers adviser that your job search strategies are polished, and that you are fully aware of the range of agencies you can approach. Let your lecturers know you are having difficulty in finding a position and ask if they could recommend some people you might speak with, or at least keep you in mind in case they hear of anything.

Consider volunteer work

Volunteer work consolidates your abilities, increases your skills and ensures you are more marketable by giving you experience. In addition to the usual channels, try private primary schools. Many Catholic primary schools welcome helpers and, if you prove yourself invaluable and make a difference, it may be possible for them to find funding in budgets later on. Do not get caught up in professional titles at this stage; sometimes you are better off working in any capacity with children to gain work savvy and great referees, rather than taking a more lucrative job that bears no relation to your preferred work environment.

Attend conferences and volunteer for any tasks. Sitting on the registration desk is a great way to find out who's who. Use this underemployed stage of your career to do further research and write articles for professional journals. It is amazing how jobs can be found for self-starters who are willing to go the extra distance, and take the time to become known around the traps.

Make sure you keep in touch with your colleagues from your course. They are often a fantastic resource, whether they can keep an eye out for you in their organisations, or as buddies to support each other in the job search process. Research, then approach places where you would love to work in the future, funding permitting. Persistence, perseverance and passion will be useful for longer term success.

Q. I'm a great cook and over the last few years I've taken on more and more catering jobs for parties and functions. My friends and clients all tell me I should give up my admin job and start up my own business. Where can I get some good advice?

There are some fantastic short courses at CAE and TAFE institutes. They will help you discover what is involved in setting up a small business in catering. They will also help you prepare a business plan to work out whether it would be financially viable. I would recommend starting up part time before quitting your day job until you know the answer to two questions: can you make a profit, and do you really want to do this as your professional job? Sometimes we prefer to keep a hobby or interest as just that. The shine can be removed if we make it our work.

Q. It took me quite a while to decide what to do with myself after we sold our business and both our children started school. I am currently doing a Certificate III in community services for aged care, which I thoroughly enjoy. I am hoping to get into community services and help people in their homes after operations and such. The one thing that worries me terribly is my very weak stomach! I am horrified at the thought of embarrassing myself in situations that I cannot avoid.

This is an exciting time in your life. You are embarking on your next career phase, and you are completing training in an area that you will find satisfying and rewarding.

Sometimes the things we anticipate will spoil and interfere with our competence don't ever occur. But it is good to think them through and have some strategies worked out. What do they advise on the course? This is likely to be a common problem, and other students would probably be relieved to have it raised: how to manage yourself in embarrassing situations when you lose it! It could take up an entire session.

A great way to prepare for this is to speak with people who have been in the field for some time. They usually have tips and funny stories. Remember, a sense of humour will never let you down. Good luck.

Q. I've been asked to apply for a job and the agency doing the recruiting conducts psychological tests on the applicants. What should I expect?

A battery of tests, including personality and ability tests, is often administered as part of the selection procedure. Different recruiters favour different test batteries. Different jobs require different tests. Different organisations place different weighting on the results. So, the most practical things I can suggest include:

- Make sure you have slept and eaten properly beforehand.
- Maintain a calm, relaxed alertness.
- Be yourself, and be honest. You can't necessarily second-guess the desired answers, and many tests have a Fake-Good component. The smartest thing to do is respond naturally.
- Read and listen to instructions carefully. Some tests are untimed, while others have a speed component. If they are timed tests, do not spend the entire 20 minutes on the first two questions. Move on, complete what you can, then return to the ones you have missed, if there is time left.
- Keep the exercise in perspective by remembering that psychological tests are merely one aspect of a selection procedure, and are interpreted by qualified professionals who are aware of the benefits and pitfalls of considering test results when ranking applicants.

If you have any queries or concerns about undertaking psychological testing, the reliability and/or validity of the testing battery, or issues of confidentiality and ethics, you should be given an opportunity to discuss this.

If you would like to discover more, or complete a few tests for practice, you could check out:

- Kendall's Australian Directory: A comprehensive directory of occupational and vocational tests, inventories and organisational questionnaires available in hard copy and CD-Rom.
- The Australian Council of Educational Research, which is a test distributor with sales and showroom sections where you can have a look at various tests.
- Related websites, using your Internet search engine. Type in the phrase 'psychological tests (personality and ability)' for further details and some free, fun tests to try in order to reduce your anxiety.

Where to get help

- Prospective employers
- A relevant union
- Career counsellor
- Association of Careers Counsellors Tel. 1800 222 390

- Centrelink Tel. 132 490
- Job Network Information Line Tel. 1300 363 365
- Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) Tel. (03) 9920 4777
- The Australian Psychological Society Tel. (03) 8662 3300
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Line Tel. 1800 333 497

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

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