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# Lesson Proper for Week 17

## How to start planning your career path

Consider these steps when creating your career path:

### 1. Learn about potential career options

Start gaining knowledge about career options by asking friends, family and colleagues about their jobs. Find out what skills they use and what qualifications they have. Ask them what they like and dislike about their jobs, and what type of experience they earned before their current position.

Next, research top companies and seek out professionals in the field. Attend in-person or online networking events or set up informational interviews with experts. To gain hands-on experience in a potential profession, try pursuing volunteer opportunities, internships or job shadowing experiences.

### 2. Discover growing job markets

Growing job markets tend to offer the most professional potential. Try talking with experts in your field to learn about some of the most exciting opportunities they foresee. Read the top publications and online news sources for your field, and watch for emerging careers that interest you.

For a more comprehensive view of growing job markets, review data-based studies like the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics list of fastest-growing occupations. With a quick glance, you can identify which jobs have the greatest potential and offer the highest median pay.

### 3. Identify careers that match your skills

To choose a field that makes you feel confident and successful, consider the technical skills that you learned in school or at work. For example, you might know how to teach concepts to a class, operate heavy equipment or develop a media buying plan.

Next, think about your soft skills, which are behaviors and traits you have acquired. For example, you might know how to analyze an issue critically, or you might excel at communicating clearly. Match your list of technical and soft skills against career paths you are considering to see how well they fit.

#### 4. Understand career qualifications

Begin by reviewing the degrees you will need to work in your field of choice. Identify whether you will need a bachelor's degree in a specific subject, and determine whether you will need a graduate degree to pursue advanced positions.

Next, examine the professional certifications that could help you excel in your field and review the licensure requirements for your profession. Take note of the licensing process in your area to make sure you are legally qualified for the job.

#### 5. Assess salaries and other benefits

To assess the earning potential in your field, try exploring salaries on Indeed or browsing careers by industry. Here, you can find the average annual salary for common occupations and identify factors that can increase your earning potential, such as acquiring an advanced degree.

As you review job listings, make note of the benefits each position offers, such as healthcare, vacation time and telecommuting opportunities. These benefits can reduce your expenses and improve your quality of life, making them essential to factor into your total compensation.

#### 6. Compare possible career paths

After considering a few potential career paths, compare your options. One may require many more skills and an additional degree, which could be more time-consuming or expensive compared to the other options. Another may have substantially higher earning potential.

Next, compare how well each career path matches your core values. One may allow you to develop more of the personal qualities and relationships you aspire to have. Another may inspire you to produce your best professional work. Review your list of pros and cons to assess which professional path is most likely to help you achieve your

goals.

## 7. Establish SMART goals

Since pursuing a career path can take years, divide broader objectives into smaller goals you can track. Try setting SMART goals to guide you through the process:

**Specific:** Identify your goal clearly and specifically. Make your goal as precise as possible. If you aspire to be a teacher, set a specific goal, like securing a job teaching high school biology in your local school system.

**Measurable:** Include clear criteria to determine progress and accomplishment. Quantify your progress. Set benchmarks like completing a bachelor's degree in education or applying to 10 jobs that meet your requirements.

**Attainable:** The goal should have a 50 percent or greater chance of success. Set goals that you can achieve. To confirm that your goal is attainable, think about the individual steps and consider how realistic they are.

**Relevant:** The goal is important and relevant to you. Any career-related goal you set should genuinely matter. Think about how important the goal is and whether it will help you reach your long-term objectives.

**Time-based:** Commit to a specific timeframe. Give your goals deadlines. You will have an easier time achieving the end result and motivating yourself to action if you have committed to a specific time frame.

## 8. Develop a career action plan

To create a map for your professional future, review action items from your SMART goals and chart the steps you will need to follow. Then, put them on a paper or digital calendar to establish your schedule. Keep your career action plan readily available so you can review it regularly. Check off each step as you complete it, and reward yourself for achievements both big and small.

Revisit and revise your career action plan as necessary. New opportunities, technological advances, personal priorities and trends in the economy can all cause essential career planning changes.

## Developing a Resume

Your resume is a one-to two-page summary of your experience, skills, and educational background. It is one of your major marketing tools in selling yourself to a potential employer. The resume and accompanying cover letter (discussed later in this chapter) function to help the employer decide whom to interview. Your goal is to write a resume that effectively conveys your skills and experience, persuading the potential employer that you should be interviewed for the job. Even so, the resume's importance can be exaggerated. An excellent resume will not get you a job. Career counselors often point out that "employers hire people, not resumes." Most employers rely heavily on the personal interview as they determine who they will hire.

Although an excellent resume cannot get you a job, a weak resume can certainly lose a job for you. Because most employers review many resumes for a given position, they must review them quickly and critically. When a pool of sixty candidates for a position must be winnowed down to three who will be interviewed, employers must look for reasons to reject many of the resumes as well as reasons to retain a few for further consideration. Misspellings, disorganization, lack of clarity, or confusing, crowded formats can give employers easy reasons to eliminate you from the pool. Therefore, focusing on the basics of good writing, clear presentation of ideas, and an easily grasped structure for the document is essential to pass even the most cursory screening of the resumes. Only after passing this hurdle will the employer examine your resume for relevant content, that is, your experience, skills, and educational background.

Most experts on resume writing agree that an effective resume summarizes your objective, your experience, your skills, and your accomplishments. The top of page one carries basic contact information—your name, address, phone number, and e-mail address. Directly under this identifying information is your objective, if you choose to include one. The objective states clearly what you are hoping to achieve through your job search.

There are many possible formats for the remainder of the resume. The two most common are the reverse chronological approach and the functional approach. Most prevalent and most commonly recommended is the reverse chronological resume. Using this format, list your most recent professional position first, followed by your previous positions in descending chronological order, finally listing your first position at the end. Under the heading for each position, list your accomplishments, activities, and responsibilities pertinent to that position.

In a functional resume, identify three to five broad skill headings and list a number of specific skills under each. For example, drawing from the job objective above, the skill headings for a functional resume might include life skills education, behavior management, and treatment plan implementation. The heading for this functional skills section of your resume might be labeled “Skills” or “Qualifications.” In a functional resume, work experiences are briefly listed in a separate section following the skills section of the resume. The order of your work experiences can either be reverse chronological, or they can be organized functionally. A functionally organized work experience section lists first the position you have held that is most closely related to your objective and lists last the position that is least closely related to that objective (Bolles, 2014; Dowd & Taguchi, 2004).

In both the chronological and functional formats, your resume should include a clear description of your skills, using action words to lead each statement. Examples of skill statements include: “Provided direct care to five adolescents with autism in a group home setting” or “Designed and implemented an arts activity program for older adults with limited mobility.” Identifying your most important skills and conveying them clearly and compellingly is perhaps the most important task in creating an effective resume. In fact, the majority of the content of your resume should be the identification of specific skills.

Closely related to skills are your accomplishments. Including a “Special Accomplishments” section in your resume gives you the opportunity to highlight particularly impressive achievements. These entries might focus on unusual initiatives or particularly successful results of your efforts. Clearly quantifying specifics of your accomplishments is highly recommended and helps to paint a vivid picture of your work successes. Examples of such quantitative accomplishment statements might include:

§ Initiated and organized a campus-wide fundraiser that yielded over \$12,000 for sexual assault services.

§ Initiated, developed, and led an innovative summer camp program for children of diverse backgrounds to learn about one another's cultures. The camp enrolled 200 children and was granted the Award of Excellence by the local Human Relations Council.

§ Chaired a conference planning task force that organized a three-day national conference with over 300 participants and 25 presenters. Oversaw a budget exceeding \$20,000 as well as a student staff of 30 people and 6 committees. Succeeded in yielding a profit of \$3,000 as well as excellent evaluations of conference quality.

## **Writing Effective Letters**

In your job search, there are many occasions to write letters. Most essential is the cover letter that accompanies your resume each time you send it out. The primary purpose of the cover letter is to highlight the connections between your experiences and skills and the needs of the employer, making a compelling case that you are the right person for the job. Equally important, the cover letter is your opportunity to demonstrate your skills in communication, writing, logic, and persuasiveness to your potential employer (Thompson, 2009). Overall, this letter functions to prepare the reader to see you in a positive light and to examine your resume as it relates to the available position. In content, your cover letter should state facts and accomplishments and relate them to the position that you are interested in. A cover letter might state, for example, "In my most recent position, I provided case management services for a caseload of 35 clients and chaired a community task force that was charged with improving interagency communication. My background is consistent with your needs for a professional to provide case management services and to lead community initiatives." Your goal is to write a letter that will persuade the reader to examine your resume and to invite you for an interview. In the closing paragraph, directly request an interview (Stuenkel, 2002).

Obviously this attention to issues of fit between your skills and the position means that each cover letter will need to be uniquely crafted to fit the particular job announcement. Do not yield to the temptation to produce a standard one-size-fits-all cover letter. These are easily recognized by employers and will take you out of the pool immediately. In fact, make every effort to address your letter to a particular individual if at all possible rather than "To Whom It May Concern." In almost all cases, the cover letter should be no more than one page and should follow the format of a standard business letter. Writing an effective cover letter will require you to do some research into the organization to which you are applying in order to tailor your comments to the mission, needs, and values of that organization. While it is not necessary to re-create every single cover letter that you write from the ground up, particular bullet points and arguments can be fine-tuned to best present your case to the specific employer to whom you are writing (Thompson, 2009).

Because resumes are sometime sent by e-mail and sometimes sent by postal service, so are cover letters. When your materials are delivered to your potential employer by postal service, the cover letter is printed on the same paper as is the resume and is placed on top of the resume, not stapled to it. Centered at the top of the page in a letterhead format, include all of your contact information including name, address, phone number, and e-mail address (Stuenkel, 2001).

When e-mailed, the cover letter content is generally the content of the message itself and your resume is sent as an attachment. In this case, be sure that the signature on your e-mail cover letter includes all of your contact information so the employer can contact you easily. When e-mailing your materials, consider carefully the e-mail account that you send it from. If you are currently employed, it is generally not advised that you use your work e-mail account for that purpose. In using a separate account, such as Gmail or Yahoo, take care that your user name is appropriate for professional use. While your friends and family might find your partyheart@gmail.com e-mail address to be amusing, most likely it will not convey the ideal image to your potential employer. Many career advisors suggest setting up an e-mail account for exclusive use in your job search as a method of streamlining and organizing the communication process (Doyle, 2009).

In addition to cover letters, there are many occasions in a job search when you need to follow up with a professional letter or e-mail message. These occasions include informational interviews, job interviews, withdrawing from a search, responding to a rejection, and accepting a job offer. All of these letters, whether on paper or via e-mail, should be written in a formal, standard business style. Under no circumstances is it appropriate to use abbreviations, emoticons, or slang such as those used in texting. Following each interview, it is recommended that you write a letter in which you not only express appreciation for the opportunity to interview but also emphasize specific points related to your suitability for the position. This type of letter also serves to express your continued interest in the position as well as your confidence that you can do the job well (Stuenkel, 2002). Thank-you notes *per se* are more appropriate following purely informational interviews. When an individual has granted you some time for the express purpose of sharing information that might be helpful in your career, this was indeed an act of generosity and kindness. A thank-you note is therefore always in order. Job interviews, however, are business meetings in which both you and the employer are working to determine whether there is a suitable match between your qualifications and the organization's needs. Therefore, a broader focus that also includes a word of thanks is a more appropriate response. Follow-up letters of this sort should be thought of as a standard part of your job search, equal in importance with the cover letter and resume.

About.com Job searching offers an array of templates and examples for cover letters. You will find there example cover letters for a range of different contexts and positions as well as general tips and guidance to ensure that your cover letter gets the attention of your potential employer.

## **Developing Interviewing Skills**

At last, the moment you've been waiting for! You have been asked to interview for a position. This is an opportunity for the employer to get to know you and to learn in more detail about your qualifications for the job. Likewise, this is your opportunity to gather more information about the organization and the position. The importance of the interview cannot be overemphasized. It is through this conversation that the employer determines not only whether you have the appropriate skills and qualifications for the position but also whether you are a good fit with the organization personally. Although you might reasonably assume that the best-qualified candidate gets the job, a host of factors come into play in the interview. Social skills, sincerity, poise, comfort level, and personal style all play a part in the chemistry of the interview. The employer, in short, wants to find a good employee. A good employee is, of course, someone who is qualified to fulfill the requirements of the position as

well as someone who works well with others, puts in a full day's work, takes initiative, and has an interest in the position beyond the income it will produce. Therefore, your interviewer will quite understandably try to get a sense of who you are as a person and will most likely take the interview beyond a narrow discussion of your skills and qualifications.

You should arrive for the interview a few minutes early and be polite and gracious to everyone. As you know from your fieldwork, professional dress in most human services organizations is generally more casual than is the case in corporate settings. You can get a sense of the typical attire of the organization from talking with someone you know who works there or from watching employees enter and leave the building. If you do not have access to this type of information, you might consider asking your interviewer or the organization's administrative assistant, once you have settled on a time and date for your interview, about typical dress within the organization. The rule of thumb in selecting your attire for the interview is to err on the side of being slightly more formal than the dress of the typical employee. Also, it is wise to dress conservatively. Both you and your clothing must at minimum be neat and clean. Your clothing should not call attention to itself. You want the interviewer to remember you, not what you were wearing. At the time of the interview, greet the interviewer with a warm smile and a firm (not limp or bone-crushing) handshake (Bolles, 2014).

In the interview, you want to convey familiarity with the organization's mission and services as well as at least a basic understanding of the position in question. Therefore, as you approach your interview, conduct more thorough research about the organization. In preparing for the interview, develop a description of yourself that you can convey to your employer in a brief statement of just a couple of minutes. This statement, of course, should be delivered in a conversational manner and should focus on your background, your strengths and skills with supporting examples or details, and your goals.

Many interviewers open with a fairly open-ended question such as "Tell me about yourself," which will give you the opportunity to convey what you feel is important about yourself (Getting Your Ideal Job, 1999). You do not want to squander this open-ended opportunity to make your case with vague statements or extraneous information that are not relevant to your qualifications or to the job. As the interview moves along, it is likely to become more structured, perhaps giving you less opportunity to deliver the message you want to deliver. As you talk about yourself throughout the interview, be sure to include specific examples of your skills rather than just talk in generalities. An interviewer might note, for example, that it is important for all employees to maintain their documentation in a timely fashion in order for agency funding to be secure. Rather than responding with a general statement that you can handle that requirement, you should follow up such an assertion with an example of how you have handled this or similar requirements successfully in other situations.

As you respond to questions about previous experiences and employers, always maintain a positive approach. Do not criticize previous employers or find fault with colleagues. Interviewers might assume that you will bring a critical disposition into their workplace. Throughout the interview maintain a strong, clear voice that is loud enough to be heard but not overpowering. Of course, using proper grammar and maintaining good eye contact are basic ingredients of professional behavior and should also be present throughout the interview. Listening carefully to the interviewer is also essential in order to understand the questions you are being asked and their context. Approaching the interview with the question, "What can I do for this employer?" and framing your remarks around

this question can help bring the proper tone and focus to the interview. Because many candidates tend to focus either on just getting the job or on what the organization can do for them, candidates who focus on meeting the organization's needs often stand out (Bolles, 2014; Holland, 2012).

Although you might think of the interview as a time when you answer questions, be prepared to ask questions as well. Interviewers routinely ask interviewees whether they have any questions. Asking questions conveys your interest in the organization and generates information that will help you to make a good decision as to whether this position and this organization are right for you. You might have questions about the position itself or the broader organization. You might ask questions about the organization's goals for the future. You might inquire about the organization's greatest strengths and assets or inquire about what the interviewer has found to be most rewarding and challenging aspects of working in the organization. In short, target your questions to help you get a sense of the organization and what it might be like to work there. Additionally, you want your questions to convey genuine interest without being invasive or negative in tone. As the interview draws to a close, reflect on the interview as a whole and identify any response that you might have made that you would like to elaborate on or clarify. When the interviewer turns the floor over to you for questions, this is also an appropriate time to say, "I'd like to touch back on a point we discussed earlier if I may." In short, use this unstructured opportunity to both ask questions and to make any additional points you might like to make.

Finally, at the end of the interview be sure to convey your appreciation for the opportunity to interview and to learn more about the position and the organization. It is also appropriate to ask any questions you might have about when a decision might be made and an approximate time that you might hear back from the interviewer. Close with the same firm handshake and smile that you began with, and convey your continued interest in the position.

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