
Career & Employment Center

Choosing a Career

*What Do You Do Well?
If you could have any type of job, what would it be?*

By Richard Nelson Bolles, author of *What Color is Your Parachute?*

Can you really sit down and figure out a career – or an alternative career – for yourself, based on what you really enjoy doing – without first going back to school for a million years of re-training? You bet you can. You can, and you must.

Here, then are some exercises and instruments designed to assist you in doing this.

Practical Exercise Number 1

There is an informal way of searching for your skills. It involves writing a diary of your life and your accomplishments, whether at work or play.

- A. Write a diary of your entire life. An informal essay of what you've done, where you were working, what you did there (not in terms of job titles – forget them – but in terms of what you think you achieved).
- B. Boast a little. Boast a lot. Who's going to see this document, besides you, God, and any 20 people that you choose to show it to? Back up your elation and sense of pride with concrete examples, and figures.
- C. Describe your spare time, in each place where you lived. What did you do? What did you most enjoy doing? Any hobbies? Avocations? Great. What skills did they use? Were there any activities in your work that paralleled the kinds of things you enjoyed doing in your leisure?
- D. Concentrate both on the things you have done, and also on the particular characteristics of your surroundings that were important to you, and that you really enjoyed: green grass, the theater, golfing, warm climate, skiing, or whatever.
- E. Keep your eye constantly on the “divine radar”: enjoyable. It's by no means always a guide to what you should be doing, but it sure is more reliable than any

other key that people have come up with. Sift later. For now, put down anything that helped you enjoy a particular moment or period of your life.

- F. When your diary is all done, you may have a small book. (My, you've done a lot of living, haven't you?) Now to go back over it, take a separate sheet of paper, and put two columns on it with these headings:

Things which, on the basis of past experience, I want to have or use in my future career(s). (With particular attention to skills.)

Things which, on the basis of past experience, I want to avoid in my future career(s).

As you go back over the diary, each time you come to something you feel fits in the first column, put it there. Each time you come to something negative in your past that you feel fits in the second column, put that there.

- G. When you come to a skill that you (a) enjoyed AND (b) did well in your opinion, put it down in the first column and underline it twice.
- H. When this is all done, go back over column one, looking primarily for skills. Choose the most important ones (to you – again, only your opinion counts) – choose 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, but not less than five. Underline these three times.
- I. Now rank them in order of decreasing importance to you. Now you have your basic units.
- J. What this exercise has left you with (hopefully) are: (a) five or more building blocks that when woven together will form one coherent job description for you; (b) a couple of lists which list (for your own private thinking, at the moment) some other things you want to have, or avoid, in your future employment.

Practical exercise Number 2

This exercise consists of a very simple question indeed. Write out your answer to the questions: If you could have any kind of job, what would it be? Invent your own, if need be; or ask yourself the question: among all the people you know or have seen or read about, whose job would you most like to have? Forget for the moment what you think you can do. What do you want to do?

One woman I know declined to do any of these exercises. But she did ask herself this question. She decided the person she most admired, whose job she most coveted, was a woman who appeared as a hostess on a television program for children. Accordingly, our job-hunter went to the local TV station in her community with a well thought out, carefully written proposal for a similar children's television program. They not only bought the idea, they asked her to be the hostess. Thus she did find her ideal job. You like this story? Try the same for yourself, then.

You may prefer to put the question to yourself in other forms, or with time sequences: a year from now, 10 years from now, 20 years from now? Try them all.

Practical Exercise Number 3

Spend as much time as necessary writing an article entitled, “Before I die, I want to...”

You may prefer to write an article on a similar topic: “On the last day of my life, what must I have done or been so that my life will have been satisfying to me?” When finished, go back over it and make two lists:

Things Already Accomplished, and: Things Yet to Be Accomplished. Then make a third column, beside the one called Things Yet to Be Accomplished, listing the particular steps that you will have to take, in order to accomplish these things that you have listed.

- Things already accomplished.
- Things yet to be accomplished. (Then number them in the order in which you would like to accomplish them.)
- Steps needed in order to accomplish the things in column 2.

As you get involved with this exercise you may notice that it is impossible to keep your focus only on your career. You will find some dreams creeping in concerning your leisure or your life-long learning – of places you want to visit, and experiences you want to have that are not on-the-job. Don't omit these. Be just as specific as possible.

Incidentally, you don't have to do this exercise just once in your life. Some career and life planning experts suggest keeping a list posted on your office or kitchen wall all year round - crossing out items as you accomplish them, and adding new ones as they occur to you from month to month.

After you've finished all the exercises, ask yourself these few questions to check how you did:

1. Since all transferable skills are used either with data, or people or things, do you now know which you most prefer working with? Is it some kind of data, or some kind of people, or some kind of things? What kind?
2. What's your second preference? Your third?
3. Have you got the skills to be more than one word? One word won't do. “I'm good at organizing,” don't tell us anything. Organizing what? People, as at a party? Nuts and bolts, as on a workbench? Or lots of information, lying in a computer? Those are three entirely different skills. “I'm good at analyzing people painstakingly,” and “I'm good at analyzing people in a flash, by intuition,” are two entirely different skills. So have you expanded each definition as much as

you can, by an object at least, and maybe an adverb or adjective? If so, great. If not, go do it.

4. Have you got all your skills arranged in order of importance, or priority, for you? Anytime you have a bunch of information about yourself, it is relatively useless to you, until you have put it in order of priority. “Here’s what I most enjoy doing, this is next, this is next and so on.” This is especially true of your skills. Looking ahead to your next job or career, which skill do you most hope you will get to use “on the job,” which next, which next, and so on.
5. Have you avoided stating your skills in the jargon or language of your past career? This is a point on which clergy, in particular, often stumble and fall. “I am good at preaching,” is not very useful skill identification. It is still cloaked in the jargon and language of one career and one career only. What is its larger form? “Teaching?” Perhaps. “Motivating people?” “Moving people to their depths?” Only you can say. But get your skills out of any jargon from your past.
6. Have you thus far steered clear of putting a job title on what you’re aiming toward? Skills can point to many different jobs, which have a multitude of titles. Don’t lock yourself into a box prematurely. “I’m looking for a job where I can use the following skill,” is fine. But, “I’m looking for a job where I can be a (job title) is a no-no, until you’ve done more homework and research.
7. Are you hanging loose, willing to look at a number of alternatives as you move through the homework and research? Or is your desire for finishing this off fast leading you to push prematurely for just one way to go? Stay loose. Preserve all your options.
8. As you have been working on the question of your future career or future job, have you begun to get some insights into your whole life and being? Keep yourself sensitive to these things, as they pop up. Properly speaking, what you’re engaged in is not merely career planning but life planning or life designing, if you prefer. You will become, in all likelihood, increasingly conscious of your values as you go along. As David Maister says, “Play to your evil secrets.” They’re not really so evil; you just think they are. But speaking candidly and to yourself alone, what are your values? Truth, beauty, righteousness, ambition, achievement, love, authority, freedom, glamour, giving, integrity, honesty, loyalty, sensitivity, caring, -- certainly come clearer for you, as you move on through your job-hunting or career planning homework. Stay alert and sensitive to these. You will get much clearer about whom you are willing to work with and for, and who you are not. Those who share your values will be on your hit parade; those who don’t, won’t.
9. Does all this planning, and the exercises, and the reflection seem like just too much? Too much work. Too much time, just too much. Have you thought of involving your loved ones and friends with you? Too much trouble? I see. Well, if you don’t want to work at all of this, then consider this one last question, here: What or who is going to rescue you, if you don’t? As Ezra Pound said, “A slave is one who waits for someone else to come and free him.” I think that’s an

erroneous definition of slavery in historical times, to say the least. But as an insight into those who are slaves at the workplaces of today, it has the ring of truth. Who are you waiting for to come and save you from boredom at your job, from a wasted life, and years of deep regrets?

Common Mistakes in Choosing a Career

In considering the following list, think of what may cause such a “mistake,” and how you might avoid it. Then think about the results of making the mistake. It may be valuable, as well, to think of examples from the lives of people you know.

1. Choosing an occupation for which the characteristics or personality of an individual do not match those needed for the careers.
2. Choosing an occupation because of the glamour, current popular demand, or on the basis of the ambitions of family and friends.
3. Choosing an occupation for which the individual lacks the required physical endurance and strength.
4. Choosing an unsuitable temporary job, which becomes permanent.