

# CAREER CORNER

# 8 IN A SERIES

## Hungry for a Career Change? Here's Some Food for Thought:

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**Are you considering a career change? Gone are the days when a person stayed in the same job with one employer for an entire career. In fact, if you're like most Americans, you'll probably make between five and seven career changes during your lifetime. With the current transformations in economic conditions, demographics, technology, and the workforce in general, more people are exploring multiple career paths.**

### WHY DO YOU CHANGE CAREERS?

Career changers have many reasons for embarking on new occupational ventures. Decisions to change careers are generally based on either internal or external factors. Internal changes usually occur when you have a shift in personal values and a desire to pursue new goals. For example, you may want to explore different interests, learn new skills, increase your financial status, spend more time with family, or decrease excessive stress. External changes derive from events outside of your control. Examples include the downsizing of a company or closing of a plant, advancement in technology, or relocation. Whatever the impetus for your career change, following a few basic steps can help make your transition successful.

### WHAT'S YOUR STRATEGY?

It's important to realize that a career change does not need to be made in one big leap. You can break down your goal into manageable pieces and begin the transition by taking small proactive steps. To do this, first develop an

overall action plan. Career planning requires dedication, time, and energy, but it is a valuable tool for mapping out a path that will put you well on your way to achieving your career goals.



### SELF-ASSESSMENT

The first and most practical step in the career change process is to conduct a thorough self-assessment of your skills, likes, interests, values, and experiences. This self-assessment helps you to better understand your abilities and recognize your strengths and weaknesses. As adults, we all may believe we know ourselves well enough, however, life circumstances can change over time and it never hurts to re-evaluate. It's also difficult to know how to target your new career, write a resume, or effectively convince an employer that you are the best candidate for the job unless you have a clear understanding of what you have to offer.

To examine your unique capabilities, begin by reviewing and listing past experiences that have provided a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, or self-worth. You should also recall experiences that were not satisfying so that you do not repeat them. Also identify your transferable skills, which are general, versatile skills acquired over time that can be applied to a variety of occupations and are highly valued by employers. Transferable skills include attributes such as communication, leadership, management, human relations, and organizational skills. You may be surprised to discover that you already have a vast skill set that you can repackage and transfer to a new career. Knowledge of these skills as well as all the assessment information you gather about yourself will provide a strong foundation as you formulate your future career direction and subsequent job search. (For more information on self-assessment, see Related Resources.)

### CAREER EXPLORATION

Next, start exploring potential career opportunities. Your self-assessment exercises will provide guidance for investigation of career options. Match your interests, strengths, and abilities with your desired occupations or industries.

Gather as much information as possible about these potential career fields. Locate career guides at your local public library. Use the Internet to do some online research. There are many Web sites that offer information about hundreds of career fields. (See Related Resources.) Try not to limit yourself only to similar careers or jobs when considering your options. Be sure to look for careers that will capitalize on both your skills and interests.

Another effective way to gain knowledge about occupations and industries is through an informational interview—an interview that you request with someone who is currently in the field. The purpose of this interview is to obtain information not a job. By asking specific questions, you can gain an in depth view of job responsibilities, training requirements, work environment, salary range, and growth potential. An informational interview can also establish a networking contact for the future. (For more on informational interviewing, see Related Resources.)

Building a network is another essential tool for exploring career opportunities. Through networking you can share your career aspirations, exchange information, and request advice and referrals. To begin networking, talk to friends, relatives, mentors, and co-workers. The bottom line is to get others involved in helping you find your career niche. Also consider broadening your networking efforts by joining relevant professional associations. These associations are excellent sources for additional information such as membership directories, employer listings, current publications, and information about conferences and workshops. You may also have the opportunity to access online resources such as listservs and chat groups. Effective networking is one of the best techniques to create connections that can lead you to your next career.

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## GET EXPERIENCE

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After thorough research, you should be in a better position to narrow your area of interest and become more focused on specific jobs. You may also determine that you will need to update your skills and broaden your knowledge. Returning to school may be a good strategy if you are entering a new field that requires educational credentials that are vastly different from your current background or degree. If you do decide to pursue additional education, start slowly! Take a course or two in order to ensure that you truly like the subject matter. Be sure to also check the accreditation of the school; look into financial aid, grants, and scholarships. And ask about the school's job placement success.

If more education is not a viable option at this time, think about finding a part-time job or volunteering in your new

career field. With a part-time job, you can earn an additional paycheck while gaining experience in a new field. Volunteering is also an excellent way to increase your knowledge and build a network. Through any of these approaches you will develop meaningful contacts, solidify your career decision, and gain valuable experience.

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## REVIEW THE BASICS

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Once you have completed your self-assessment, researched your career field, targeted the job you want, and obtained any necessary experience, your final step is to brush up on the “job hunting basics.” Review resources on writing resumes and cover letters. Research companies. Practice interviewing and hone your salary negotiation skills. (For more job hunting resources, see Related Resources.)

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## IT'S WORTH THE EFFORT!

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The journey of a career change can be a fascinating and worthwhile experience, but you will need to be flexible, persistent, and confident along the way. It's normal to feel unsure about making a change and forging into uncharted territory. There will be a learning curve for any new career you try, but this is part of the process. There may even be minor setbacks or times when you need to re-direct your plan. Don't be discouraged. Remember to set reasonable goals. Changing careers takes time, effort, flexibility, and commitment. If you truly want to shift your career, don't allow age, money, time, or lack of experience to stop you. Look for opportunities that will bring you closer to your goal. Achieving a series of small steps will put you on a pathway leading to the threshold of a new and successful career.

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## RELATED RESOURCES:

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If you are an enrolled student, you can access an extensive listing of career-related Web sites as well as links to information about self-assessment, career exploration, informational interviewing, networking, job hunting, and more at the Excelsior College Web site. Go to [www.excelsior.edu](http://www.excelsior.edu); then login and click on the Career Resources link on your MyEC page.

**Questions or comments about this article? Contact Maribeth Gunner Pulliam, Career Resource Coordinator/Senior Academic Advisor – School of Liberal Arts.**