



How to Take Charge of Your Career

**DON'T JUST DREAM
ABOUT A GREAT CAREER—
MAKE IT HAPPEN!**

QuickGUIDES

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HOW TO TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR CAREER

By acclaimed professional development and career coach, and one of North America's most admired training experts, Deidre Dutcher

In my experience as a career adviser, the most common statement I hear is, "I don't know what I want to be when I grow up" and, as you might have guessed, I'm counseling grown-ups! I think this is probably one of the toughest issues we grapple with throughout life; after all, work is a huge chunk of our life and choosing the right occupation is important.

The majority of us started feeling the pressure of choosing a career or a job as we approached graduation from high school. If we were moving into the work force we had to find work that we were skilled enough to perform, that provided the income we needed and maybe even offered some personal satisfaction. If we were headed to college, we might have already given some thought to what our major would be and we chose a correspondingly appropriate college or, for many of us, we postponed some of those difficult decisions by choosing liberal arts!

If we were good procrastinators, when we left college or high school we fell into a job because we were desperate not to live with our parents and took whatever we could get. Perhaps we did choose a particular field, industry, or vocation only to find, to our dismay, that there were aspects of the work that we didn't consider or didn't even know about. We weren't finding the personal or financial rewards we had hoped for.

Either way, so many of us ended up in the same place – and that's when I hear that familiar statement – "I just don't know what I want to do. I don't even know what my choices are." And isn't that the real problem? If only someone, somewhere along the line, had just given us the Master List of All Jobs. If we could have seen ALL the choices, we could have done some research and picked the right one! If we could just find the Master List now, we'd feel so much better about making a change and choosing what we could do!

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The bad news is, there is no Master List. Even if there were, reading through a huge list of job titles isn't going to help you make a better choice. The good news is, wherever you are in your career path, you don't have to blame yourself for not planning your future well enough or for making bad choices. Career planning isn't static – it's dynamic and variable. Your choices change because you change, your life change and the world around you changes. More than any other aspect, good career planning is about adapting to change: increasing our awareness of change, embracing change, taking risks that create change, and finding the lessons in that change.

Whether you're looking for more satisfaction from your job, looking for ways to get further faster, or simply just looking, good career planning is less about knowing what's out there to choose from and more about knowing what's in you that's doing the choosing!

WHERE TO START

Let's start with a piece of advice I know you've heard before – find your passion, find your strengths, and then find a way to use those strengths and that passion.

That advice is correct – but it doesn't go far enough. I want you to go much, much deeper than just identifying passion and strengths. This example illustrates what I mean:

One of my clients, Janice, knew that her passion was baking. She was always asked to bake something for her kids' team banquets, or for the church bake sale or the family holiday meal, and she usually enjoyed being asked. Knowing her passion, she decided to leave her project management job and she went to work for a local retail grocery chain that was well known for its wonderful baked goods – homemade breads, fresh cookies, and beautifully crafted cakes and desserts. It didn't take Janice long to realize that she

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wasn't coming home filled with the joy she had imagined at the end of a day of work. Now she was confused; she was following her passion, in fact, she was immersed in her passion! She was spending the day baking and she was feeling stressed and unhappy, which is why she had come to see me.

I asked Janice a series of questions about what she loved about baking: When you're baking, at what times do you feel the excitement, the joy? When are you happiest when you bake? When are you stressed? Think of times you've been asked to provide a dessert for your family. What aspects of being asked did you like? When did it seem like a burden? Janice's answers were revealing. When she was asked to just "come up with something" she felt the best, and when she was asked for something specific like "a birthday cake with a Transformer theme and red and yellow colors" she felt more burdened by the task.

What I was seeing was that Janice's passion was more about creating than baking. Baking was simply the medium she had chosen to express her creativity. In her new job in the bakery department, there was little opportunity for creativity. Most of the baking was for preordered items or duplicates of stock items to fill the shelves. Almost all the creativity had been taken out of the task and that's why she was unhappy. Once we identified, much more deeply, what Janice's real passion was, dozens of opportunities opened up. There were ways she could indulge her creative passion in hundreds of companies across many industries and mediums.

Janice had come from an IT background and had felt stifled there because most of her work involved writing programs for data management, which required little creativity. Her new strategy combined her computer skills with what she now understood her passion to be, and she happily went to work as a Web designer for a company that managed Websites for small to midsize businesses.

This is why a Master List of All Jobs won't help you. Had Janice looked at "Website builder" when she thought her passion was baking, she would have quickly crossed it off the list. One of the great lessons we can learn

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from this experience is that you may be able to find the satisfaction you're looking for right where you are, simply by tweaking the job you have or moving into another area of the company.

So your first project is to really get to know yourself.

- What kinds of activities do you enjoy, and even more importantly, why do you enjoy them?
- Which aspects of those activities do you enjoy the most?
- What are some of the reasons why you made the career choices you've made thus far?
- What expectations do you have for your life that aren't being met?

As you begin to answer these questions, help uncover your passions and strengths by finding threads that tie different activities together. This helps you discover the real passion behind the activity. Also ask yourself why you've made some of the choices you've made. Even if things didn't turn out the way you anticipated, you can learn a lot by digging into your motives and unmet expectations.

Another reason a Master List doesn't work is because no two jobs with the same job title are ever the same. Different companies, different industries, and different departments arbitrarily pick job titles that may not reflect the real nature of the work. You may have chosen a job that you thought would be stimulating or fulfilling but the work wasn't what you expected. So really get to know yourself and then be willing to learn even more about the complex person who you are. You have more choices than you think. One fun tool you might use is the MBTI, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality assessment tool. You can take the test online or it may be available through your local career center. Then go to the library and get the book *Do What You Are*, which matches career choices to the 16 Myers Briggs personality types. It's a great place to get started!

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CREATING YOUR PLAN

Now it's time to create your plan, and your plan can be as unique and individual as you are. Some people feel more secure if they have a long-term goal, a plan to get to that goal, and milestones along the way to outline their activities and measure their progress. For some it might mean mapping a career path in their current company. For others, it could be a willingness to change companies every three to five years to take advantage of opportunities. Someone comfortable with less structure might find a more entrepreneurial path and may prefer to reinvent themselves within their industry or change industries altogether.

One client of mine changed paths frequently and happily. She knew herself well and knew she needed change to stay stimulated. She started out in counseling because she enjoyed helping people. Soon she was designing and facilitating workshops to counsel groups of people. As she developed her workshops, she realized that she loved writing programs and delivering them to groups and became a trainer in an entirely different industry.

Contrast that with my sister-in-law, who values persistence and stick-to-itiveness. Straight out of high school she started in the mailroom in a large appliance company. As she moved up, she dealt with a very difficult boss but was finally able to get a position in the secretary pool. When one of her bosses was made CEO, guess who he picked to be his executive secretary! Her work ethic paid off and she now accompanies her boss in the company Learjet to his board meetings!

There is a relatively new option that is becoming more and more popular, sometimes by choice and sometimes just out of necessity, and that's a portfolio career. This term refers to patching together your skills into a variety of contract, part-time, and variable work options to create income. Perhaps you'd like to stay home with your kids and you have writing skills. You may do some freelance work in writing, run an after-school day care for working families, and, since it sounds like you can balance a lot, also work one-on-one with clients helping them solve their personal organization and time management problems. For some, this kind of career totally fulfills their needs while others find working at home a difficult environment.

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Again, to create your plan, you need to know yourself. You also need to shed some of the baggage you've been carrying about what you think a plan needs to be. Our parent's generation generally picked a career and worked in the same industry or the same company until they retired. They believed in loyalty to the company, and they defined a good career as being employed throughout their working life by one company.

I have a young client who graduated with a major in hospitality and tourism. She has since acquired her Yachtmaster's certificate and is living an adventurous life as the First Mate and Chef on a beautiful chartered sailing ship in the Caribbean. She works nine months out of the year and is saving money on expenses because she lives on the boat. Her parents keep asking her when she's going to get a "real job." It bothers her that she feels she's let her parents down. She wants them to be proud of her, as she's proud of the skills she's acquired in sailing, scuba diving, cooking specialty meals, and giving people a wonderful week on vacation. Hopefully someday they'll realize that she does have a "real job" and be happy for her.

THINK SHORT- AND LONG-TERM: DO YOU HAVE THE SKILLS YOU NEED?

You can and should have long- and short-term strategies. Both may include any skills training that you need, and there are a lot of options beyond formal education that can save you time and money. There are certification programs that can be much less expensive and take far less time than a degree. Gaining experience is an important part of your plan, and you may take a job to get some experience on your résumé. You don't necessarily have to go into that job thinking that's your choice for life. Some jobs may be part of your short-term plan.

Companies used to look at someone with a work history of moving to different companies as lacking loyalty and commitment. In our current economy, changing companies every three to five years has

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actually become more the norm, and some hiring managers even think that if you haven't moved around a bit, you may lack motivation or drive. Don't be afraid to take a job to try it out. See what that industry offers that you wouldn't know about unless you worked there.

Everything you're doing in the short term can become part of your long-term plan as well. Every job you take helps you add to your technical skills, but even more importantly, it bolsters your transferable skills. The most critical skills in today's workplace are, in this order, verbal communication, creative problem-solving skills, teamwork, written communication, and, last, technical skills. Identify the areas where you've demonstrated these skills, and keep a record. If you solved a problem or were part of a team, identify your contribution and, most importantly, identify the results you accomplished. These will become your marketing tools when you're looking for that promotion or are ready to move on to your next career step.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KEEP

There are a few more important things you need to keep track of as you're working, to make sure you have all the information you need as you move forward. Be sure to keep a copy of all of your performance reviews. Keep a record of any training that is provided to you – through your company, from an outside company, or training that you get on your own. Keep a copy of the certificate or the title of the training, when you got it, and what organization delivered the training. You should also keep copies of any awards or recognition that you receive, both formal and informal. Formal recognition could be a certificate of achievement for reaching or exceeding a quota or goal. Examples of informal recognition could be a letter of thanks for solving a problem from a customer or an email from a supervisor or coworker acknowledging a contribution you made. These are important marketing tools for you to manage your career. It's hard to remember the things we do on a day-to-day basis, and these are the accomplishments that demonstrate your value and, often, your transferable skills.

Working on your stories is a big part of what's called branding in the career management world. All of the information you've been accumulating on your training, experience, skills, awards, problem solving, and recognition is what sets you apart from any other candidate.

You're keeping track of all of this so that you can communicate it to others when there's an opening in your company that you'd like to move into, or you're talking to someone at a networking event and they want to know a little about you in a professional sense, or you're interviewing at another company that may offer you your next move in your career. The way that you communicate all this information is through stories – so you need to be working on your stories. Working on your stories is a big part of what's called *branding* in the career management world. All of the information you've been accumulating on your training, experience, skills, awards, problem solving, and recognition is what sets you apart from any other candidate.

The way that you communicate your brand is by telling your stories. People like stories. Telling stories makes it easy for them to listen and especially to remember you and what you bring to the table. Stories give them context, and when you're talking about an award or recognition you received you don't have to worry about sounding like a braggart, because the information is in the context of the story. Stories bring your work to life. They paint the picture of what you've done, which helps people see you in your job and actually increases their willingness to hire you. Most importantly, stories demonstrate your skills in a way that conveys capability not present in a list of duties and tasks. Working on your stories, writing them down, and practicing them out loud improves your communication skills and can give you an edge over any other candidate in the running for that position.

NETWORK. THEN NETWORK. THEN NETWORK SOME MORE

The most important focus of any career management plan is networking. It's the key to being proactive in working your plan. Over 70% of jobs are found through networking or some aspect of networking. More than any other skill you can develop, networking is critical.

Joining some trade organizations in your profession is a great way to learn and network at the same time. You can Google® “trade groups and organizations” and get hundreds of listings or search for a specific industry or occupation. There are groups especially for professional women. Don't forget alumni groups, chambers of commerce, and local businesses. Groups

and organizations often offer workshops, webinars, and other training opportunities. There are usually meetings, banquets, or events where you'll have the ability to meet people and exchange business cards. You may join some organizations that are not job-related but appeal to other interests you have. These are equally good places to meet people from a variety of industries and walks of life and learn about opportunities you may not have considered.

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One of my clients hadn't worked since she graduated from college 20 years earlier. Her husband had died and she wanted to go to work, not just for the money, but to help her get on with her life. Fortunately, she had been a good networker all those years. She was involved in her kids' school, she volunteered at a few community agencies and did some campaigning for local politicians. She ran into one of her contacts in the grocery store and was offered a high-paid position with a start-up company involved in manufacturing a new green-energy bio diesel fuel. She has been a jack-of-all-trades in helping this company meet its marketing goals, build a Website, get accreditation from a major research firm, and win grants for expanding the business. The most important skills she possessed since she left college were her networking skills.

LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES

An often overlooked activity in career management is staying aware of opportunities. Be an active reader. Read your local daily newspaper. It's a great source of information about what's going on in the business world in your community. There are articles about companies that are expanding, or about companies new to the area that are opening branches or offices.

If you enjoy writing, you may submit an article to the paper about your company (with approval from the company, of course) that can be good marketing for the company as well as get your name out in public. There are announcements of people who have joined a firm, been promoted, or won an award. If you see someone you know on this list, even casually, send him or her a personal card of congratulations. It's a nice gesture and keeps your name in front of him or her.

Read magazine articles about emerging industries and keep up with what's changing in the business and work worlds. You should also be aware of businesses or industries that may be losing ground so you can prepare yourself in advance for change. It's much better to make the change yourself than to have it made for you!

Read online blogs about career management. There are several great bloggers who can give you advice and the latest information on managing your career and being proactive in the process. Join some online groups where you can contribute and use those groups to build your network across the country and the world. LinkedIn® is a must in today's social media world. Make sure you have a complete profile on LinkedIn®. Connect with people and exchange recommendations. Join some groups that catch your interest and participate in discussions.

You can be pretty certain that any time you apply for any position, a recruiter from that company will be checking your online profile, and LinkedIn® has become an important source for recruiters looking for candidates as well. If you're not familiar with this site, there are tutorials offered by LinkedIn® on their YouTube channel as well as other information available on the Web.

Join some online groups where you can contribute and use those groups to build your network across the country and the world. LinkedIn® is a must in today's social media world. Make sure you have a complete profile on LinkedIn®. Connect with people and exchange recommendations.

RESOURCES ABOUND

There is a wealth of helpful resources for aiding you in career choices, career plans, and career management both on the Web and in your community. You don't have to be unemployed to take advantage of many of the programs at your local career center. They offer workshops to help you maneuver the application and testing process for civil service jobs. USA Jobs is the Department of Labor Website for job postings and it's free. Many companies that don't pay for postings on the bigger job boards may be found there. If you want help in choosing a career, changing careers, or using your transferable skills, a good starting place is MyNextMove.dol.gov, a Department of Labor Website, or MySkillsMyFuture.org. Both of these sites can help you assess your current skills and give you industries seeking those skills, show you what occupations are most in demand, and tell you what skills you would need to have to be considered. If you're a veteran, there should be a local veterans group in your area, and the Department of Labor has a specialized staff member to help explain resources specifically available to veterans.

BE PROACTIVE!

Wherever you are in your career, you can start being proactive in developing your plan and managing your next steps. Make it fun! It's a journey of learning about yourself, finding your strengths, and creating your adventure. If it's stressful, you're not doing it right! Enjoy the process. There's no right way or wrong way and there's often some chance and luck involved. But the more you work at it, the greater your chances of success and the better luck you create. The man at the top of the mountain didn't fall there, so enjoy the climb!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Deidre Dutcher is a highly sought-after trainer and career consultant. She has extensive experience in what she describes as the most rewarding work imaginable – helping people go from not knowing what they want to do with their lives to achieving their career dreams.

Deidre has counseled hundreds of men and women as they deal with the trauma of corporate downsizing. She has been nothing short of a lifeline to those fortunate enough to come under her guidance.

Whether she is advising clients one-on-one or delivering training on communication, leadership, or career development to hundreds, Deidre has a heart for people that comes through loud and clear. Her advice is concrete and actionable. Her authentic presentation style is one that connects deeply with her audience. For information on how to bring Deidre Dutcher into your organization or to your next event, call 1-800-344-4613.

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