

Generating Ideas

A **bewildering** number of career options exist for graduates, especially in the UK when so many graduate recruiters do not demand a particular degree subject. Despite this, when it comes to thinking of options for your future, it can be very hard to come up with anything at all. This leaflet suggests a number of different methods for generating career ideas.

STARTING WITH YOUR SUBJECT

Many students, rightly or wrongly, start with their degree subject. Here are a few resources to help:

- The **AGCAS Options series** lists a number of common career options for a range of degree subjects (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/options).
- Information about what recent graduates from your subject have gone into can be found from the **Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE)** survey. National summaries can be found at www.prospects.ac.uk/links/wdgd and your careers service should have a detailed listing for your course. Beware: this information is only collected six months after graduation and the destinations listed may not be as helpful as you hope.
- Some of the **societies and institutes** linked to a particular subject (eg Institute of Physics or Royal Geographical Society) have careers sections on their websites. This often includes case studies of the different careers that people with a particular degree have gone on to pursue. The level of help and information provided varies considerably from subject to subject.

This is fine if you wish to pursue a career closely linked to your subject. However, if you have studied a subject with no obvious careers linked to it or you just want to see what other options might be available, you need to do a bit more work.

PREPARING TO HAVE IDEAS

In order to generate potentially useful ideas for your future you need to work on two main areas:

- Try to expand your background knowledge of the range of career possibilities out there in the world. The more jobs you know about, the more likely it is that you will discover something interesting.
- Try to think carefully about what factors are important to you. What skills do you want to use or develop? What subject matter interests you? What would you like to achieve in your career? The clearer you are about what will satisfy you, the easier it will be to select the ideas with the most potential.

EXPANDING YOUR CAREER KNOWLEDGE

Read career guides

These offer basic descriptions of a wide range of jobs. A good way to start is by browsing through the contents page or index making lists of job titles under three headings: 'interesting', 'unlikely' and 'unknown'. Now read through a few sample profiles from your 'unlikely' list just to make sure that you are not rejecting them

based on false assumptions. Next, read through the 'unknown' profiles and transfer them to 'interesting' or 'unlikely' as appropriate.

- AGCAS occupational profiles (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations)
- *The Guardian Guide to Careers*, Jimmy Leach (ed), Guardian Books, 2005
- *The Penguin Careers Guide*, Jan Widmer, Penguin Books, 2006
- *Careers 2007*, Trotman Publishing, 2007
- *The Careers Directory: The One-stop Guide to Professional Careers*, Ken Reynolds & John Mainstone (eds), Cambridge Occupational Analysts, 2006
- *A-Z of Careers and Jobs*, Susan Hodgson, Kogan Page, 2007
- Connexions Jobs4u careers database (www.connexions-direct.com/jobs4u)

Examine vacancies

As well as looking for jobs you can actually apply for, you can generate ideas and broaden your career knowledge by looking at a wider range of vacancy sources. Your careers service will have a number of different newspapers and professional magazines. Read all the adverts and pick out jobs (or just parts of jobs), in any industry and at any level, that look interesting. Each job you identify is the starting point for some background research. What other jobs exist in this area? What are the entry points into this career? Are there similar roles in other sectors?

Look around you

Every day when you go out, read, watch television, etc, try to identify things that you would like to have been involved in: events you would like to have organised, writing you would have liked to produce, people you would like to have helped. Try to find out who is involved already and discover how they got there.

Find out what other people do

Make a list of everyone you know: family, friends, colleagues, etc. Ask them what jobs they know about that they could see you doing. Ask them why. Ask them if they know anyone doing that job already. Talk to that person and ask them what other jobs they could see themselves doing.

ANALYSING IMPORTANT FACTORS

Use career tools

There are a number of tools out there to help you think about what you might want from your career. They will help you to think about what you enjoy doing, what interests you, what motivates you, etc.

- **Prospects Planner** is an online program which asks you to score various skills and motivating factors based on how important they are to you. It will then compare your answers to a database of occupational profiles and suggest matches. If you expect it to come up with your perfect career, you will be disappointed,

but it may provide a useful starting point. However, you can use the questions as a prompt to help you identify factors important to you in a career. (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pplanner).

- **sort_it** contains exercises and advice to help you think about your priorities. The obvious place to go is the Option Generating section, but you may find it useful to look at the Self Knowledge section first (www.careers.lon.ac.uk/sortit).
- **Windmills Interactive** also contains exercises to help you think about your skills and priorities (www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive).

As well as online tools, there are a vast number of career self-help books which may provide useful exercises and ideas for identifying your priorities. Visit your careers service to browse their collection. Some examples include:

- *Build your own Rainbow: a workbook for career and life management.* Barry Hopson and Mike Scally, Management Books 2000, 1999.
- *What Colour is your Parachute?: a practical manual for job hunters & career-changers.* Richard Nelson Bolles. Ten Speed Press, 2005.
- *How to Get a Job You'll Love,* John Lees. McGraw-Hill, 2007.

Focus on skills

Choose a particular skill that you enjoy using (eg writing, problem solving, negotiating, public speaking, analysing information, organising, etc). Now list all the jobs you know which use that talent. Ask other people to do the same.

It is often helpful to think of as many different words for your skill as you can. For example 'advising' could also be 'counselling', 'supporting', 'guiding', 'informing', 'directing', etc. The more words you have the more ideas you might prompt.

Focus on a subject

Choose a topic that really motivates you. List all the jobs you can think of that involve doing it, helping others do it, teaching or talking about it, selling it, writing about it, creating products related to it, organising events associated with it, promoting it, etc. Again, get others to help you.

Focus on a sector

Pick an employment sector (eg finance, advertising, media, health, etc) that interests you and find out about as many different jobs in that sector as you can. Find people to talk to in the sector and ask what other jobs they know about or interact with.

THINGS THAT MAY LIMIT YOUR IDEAS

Coming up with good ideas is a creative process that requires preparation and perseverance. It is very easy to do things which will limit your idea generating ability.

Criticising too soon

Ideas will dry up if you try to make them too practical too quickly. If you start finding faults and disadvantages with an idea straightaway, you can kill it. Very few ideas you initially come up with are likely to be brilliant. However, if you investigate an intriguing idea and explore around it, you may discover other ideas with more potential. If you reject the idea immediately, you will never get to these secondary suggestions.

Focusing on short-term costs

Sometimes people ignore potentially great ideas because they look too difficult in the short term. Achieving it may involve retraining or a lot of networking or a period of low pay. This puts them off exploration. You need to compare costs and benefits in the long term. This means investigating potential rewards and satisfactions beyond the first few years or months.

Asking for too much

It can be hard to think of career ideas if you are trying to satisfy too many requirements at once, especially if some of those requirements are potentially contradictory. It may be worth trying to prioritise your factors or just use them one at a time to generate ideas.

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR IDEAS

The first thing to do with any idea, even if you are not yet sure how helpful or realistic it may be, is to record it. Have a place where you can systematically list ideas.

The next step is to investigate it. Many of the career guides mentioned above have suggested sources of further information. You may also want to try to find someone who is doing that job already so that you can ask them a few probing questions to get information that is particularly relevant to you. Again, record the information you gather.

If you are alert and ask the right questions then your investigations may generate other possible ideas for related careers. Record and investigate these too. You should also get an idea of the future rewards of the career and the qualities that make someone successful.

When you have gathered a lot of information, try to evaluate your idea by comparing the attractiveness of this career option with the likely effort involved in attaining it.

KEEP DOING IT

Even when you have found a suitable career option, it can be sensible to keep up the habit of looking for new ideas and opportunities. The world of work is changing all the time and being alert to new ideas is one way of staying employable.

GETTING HELP

It might help to talk to someone about your ideas, either to inspire you to think further, or to get a reality-check on them! This person may be a family member, friend, tutor or someone else within college. Or, find your college careers service where trained advisers can act as a sounding-board.

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