

Career Decision-Making

The career decision-making process

Did you know that most people spend more time deciding which car to buy than determining a career direction? Why do they spend so little time on such an important task? Because career decision making can be overwhelming!

Perhaps you have avoided thinking about this decision for other reasons. You may feel that the start of your career is far in the future. Maybe you have bypassed the process and are pursuing a career that fulfills family expectations. Perhaps you assume that you will be happy working in a well-known field like teaching, engineering, or medicine and see no reason to research the myriad of other possible occupations. Or perhaps you are feeling overwhelmed by the number of potential options amid an environment that is constantly changing.

If you delay the decision-making process you may find yourself:

- In a career that doesn't fit with your values, interests, personality preferences, and skills
- Completing a degree that you have no interest in
- Feeling your work lacks meaning or challenge
- Suffering from boredom or burnout
- Feeling caught between life and work values

Thoughtful and intentional decision making paves the way to a satisfying career choice. The more focused you are, the less onerous the process will be. The decision-making process can be used for making many types of career-related choices, including:

- Which training/educational program to pursue
- Which occupational field to enter
- Which paid/volunteer experience would be most satisfying
- Whether to change occupations and/or fields
- Whether to start a small business

There are no definite timelines to follow in the process of career decision making: you may work through it quickly; it may take you six months or a year. Since making a good decision is so important, completing both the [Self-assessment](#) and [Occupational and labour market research](#) sections is critical. If you have completed these two sections, you are well prepared to proceed with the career decision-making process.

Decision making within the context of change

To make good decisions that ultimately lead you to satisfying career choices, it is important to have an approach that helps you effectively assess your career alternatives. This approach should include reference to your interests, skills, values, personality preferences, as well as to your personal situational factors (such as family and cultural influence, gender, health, etc.), as discussed in [Self-assessment](#). It should also recognize the roles that chance and change play in this process, and thus promote flexibility as your decision-making process unfolds.

The following sections outline one such possible approach to help you navigate the decision-making process. Although there is a logical order to this approach, the process of career decision making is not linear, so you may find yourself working through the "steps" simultaneously or completing one or more components at a later date:

- Assess and narrow your options
- Make an initial decision
- Set a goal
- Develop an action plan
- Implement and adapt your plan

Assess and narrow your options

At this point, you may be considering one or several career options. If more than a few, it is important to narrow these options to a manageable number: three is the maximum recommended. Refer to your vision statement and other information gathered through the [Self-assessment](#) process. (If you have not completed this step, you may wish to do so now): which career options best 'fit' with that vision? By making this comparison for each occupational option, you may find that you are able to shorten your list. You can then take a more structured approach to assessing your target occupations. The [Assess your occupational options](#) section will help you with this process.

Pay attention to your feelings about each alternative: are you sensing excitement? Disenchantment? Though it is important to be logical in the career decision-making process, your gut reaction to an occupation is also important.

Make an initial decision

When you have completed assessing your options, select one to move forward with. Beware thoughts that might limit your choices. For example, though it is necessary to consider the effect of your choices on those you love and care about, placing too much emphasis on others' needs may prevent you from identifying and following a truly rewarding career path.

Some people believe they are limited by their past, resulting in a fixed mindset. With this mindset, they often avoid challenges and tasks because they fear failure. Since our failures are often our richest source of teaching moments, the valuable lessons learned from these can then be applied to making better future decisions. It is therefore important to overcome such a limiting mindset. If you think this applies to you, it might be helpful to begin altering this mindset by reading about people who have, in your opinion, accomplished great things; notice their approach and orientation to failure, and how they used it to shape successful futures. Developing a growth mindset is critical to successful visioning.

Other limiting factors that merit consideration include:

- Fear of: success and what it will bring; rejection; commitment; change; the unknown
- Low self-confidence/low self-esteem
- Finances and socio-economic status
- Geographic location (e.g., are jobs relating to your vision typically located in an undesirable or inaccessible location?)

Be careful not to let one perceived barrier undermine your whole vision. Think about ways you might overcome such a barrier and attain your goal. It is usually possible to achieve at least a piece of the vision.

Set a goal

After you have made a tentative choice, it's time to set a goal and begin to move towards it.

As introduced in [Self-assessment](#), proactive decision making begins with a clear vision of what you want your personal and professional life to look like. It is a vivid description of a future you desire to create. As such, it should be a statement you experience as motivating and compelling. It should incorporate all that is important to you and about you in your ideal future. Your career goal will be drawn from this vision statement.

Effective goal setting helps you to move towards your vision. Your attitude is the most important predictor of success in achieving goals. As discussed above, limiting beliefs can affect your level of accomplishment: you are likely to achieve only what you believe you can. A goal is simply a more precise statement of a decision reached in the previous step.

- **Specific:** A goal is specific when you know exactly what is to be achieved and accomplished.
- **Measurable:** Measurable goals are quantifiable (e.g., numbers, dollars, percentages).
- **Achievable:** An achievable goal is within your reach (perhaps a stretch) based on your skills and level of motivation.
- **Realistic:** A realistic goal is one for which you have the resources (e.g., time for training, money for education, support from significant others).
- **Time specific:** A time-specific goal is finite; it has a deadline (e.g., "by June 30, 2XXX" is much more specific than "soon").

For example, a decision to work in human resources might lead to the following goal statement: "attain a management-level position leading to corporate training in the technology sector within the next five years."

Develop an action plan

Effective planning will help you to realize your career goal. Write it down! There is ample evidence that those who devise and record a concrete plan for reaching a goal are much more likely to attain it. To reach your goal, you will need to identify the action plan steps, or short-term goals, that will help you attain it. To develop these steps, refer to your occupational research: the more information you have gathered, the more informed you will be as to what is required to reach your occupational goal. It will also be helpful to be mindful of any potential barriers you identified earlier in the process, as well as your ideas about how to overcome them. Once you have devised your overall plan, you should construct a detailed plan for taking each step. The plan for the first steps should be as thorough and specific as possible (apply the S.M.A.R.T. principles again). For example, "increase my overall average to B+ by the end of this term" is better than "achieve higher grades."

As you consider your action steps remember that the world is too complex to ever know all the variables that might affect your plan: accept that you don't control all these variables. Change and chance will most likely play a significant role in your career trajectory. Things don't happen in a specific order or on schedule. So, provide as much detail as you can, but be prepared to be flexible, realizing that you may need to adjust your plan several times before you reach your occupational goal. Remember also that your goal itself may alter, slightly or greatly. Embrace the uncertainty.

Implement and adapt your plan

Refer to your plan often: Are you on track? Is some fine-tuning required? Perhaps major alterations? Do the action plan steps you have identified still make sense? Has the goal changed at all? Do you lack information or support? If the basic goal remains the same and the process seems to be on track, add more detail to the steps as they become more imminent. If new information or obstacles have emerged, you may need to make some minor to moderate changes. If the goal has changed, you will need to make major revisions to the action plan.

Assess your occupational options

As was noted in the previous section, decision making is difficult. It can be helpful to employ several different approaches. Use any that are helpful to you and your situation.

You might prioritize your options according to how closely they match your overall goal or vision. Or you might compare them in terms of advantages, disadvantages, and potential outcomes. A pros/cons list can be a very effective tool. The visual impact of seeing the positives and negatives of each option can be especially revealing: it is not always a matter of which list is the longest, as some factors may emerge as having more significance than you previously thought. Assigning scores, or weights, to each of the criteria used in your comparison can also lead to greater clarity: the option with the highest resulting total score would likely be your "best" choice, at this time.

Regardless of the approach you use, if you discover that two or more of your career options compare equally or closely, it is a good idea to re-examine your self-assessment criteria as they relate to the options being compared: have you included all criteria that are the most important to you? Have you accurately and fairly assessed each option against these criteria? If this re-examination does not result in any change in scores or weighting, gaining first-hand experience in one or more of these occupational areas may help with the decision-making process. Activities such as job shadowing, volunteering, working part-time, or participating in an internship can provide a better sense of whether or not an occupation is a good choice for you.

Once you have a "winner," how do you feel about it? If you are excited and ready to proceed with it, that's great! If your reaction is less than enthusiastic or you are disappointed that one of the other options did not emerge as the strongest choice, again consider re-examining your self-assessment criteria and their comparison to the alternatives you are considering. Taking this step may provide additional insight. Ultimately, it is important that you feel this is the right choice for you, at this time in your life, and that you are motivated to pursue it.

If you are not enthused about the occupation that emerges with the highest score or are unable to make a decision at this point, you may find it helpful to book a Career Development appointment through [Centre for Career Action](#) to discuss your situation and options.

Remember that you will likely have more than one career path in your life. If you are struggling between two choices (or more), though you will need to choose one career direction initially, perhaps the other(s) will remain future options for you. Whether a change in career direction requires major or minor changes in your life, most career shifts are possible if adequately prepared for.

Take action

As you take action, you may begin to experience difficulty in moving towards your goal. Sometimes people put so much emphasis on a career decision that they become immobilized with fear or uncertainty. If you find yourself in this situation, you may merely need to give yourself a push; however, if you find that you are really "stuck," you may benefit from consulting a career professional.

Celebrate accomplishments and milestones. Be kind to yourself: pursue activities you enjoy and surround yourself with supportive people. Replace self-limiting assumptions and irrational beliefs with positive thoughts and statements. Expect to make mistakes. Evaluate them: they can enrich your life experience and enhance your learning. Continue to engage in new experiences and to make new connections: both will provide you with new and helpful information for your goals, plan, and vision as well as potential opportunities. You can use what you learn to revise your current plan and improve future career decisions.

Don't forget the big picture: sometimes, some of the intermediate steps may be less enjoyable and more challenging than you might like; however, if you keep in mind where the steps are leading, you will be more likely to continue moving towards the achievement of your vision.

Be sure not to view any necessary revisions to your plan as negative. In fact, a plan that remains unchanged is likely not reflective of new information that you are undoubtedly acquiring about yourself, your circumstances, and the labour market. Revisions help to ensure that your plan is dynamic, and that you are continuing on a course that is truly reflective of your vision. A plan that is too rigid will likely prevent you from reaching your goal, or result in your dissatisfaction with your goal, once it is attained.

About risk taking...

Every action or decision comes with a certain element of risk; however, so does taking no action. It is important to be realistic about the level of risk you are willing to take: you may wish you were more adventurous (or less so!), but you will likely not move toward your vision if you are not honest with yourself regarding your risk tolerance. At the same time, analyze any fears you experience: are risks real or imagined? Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the worst that can happen if I pursue this path?
 1. How likely is it that something negative will happen?
 2. How could I resolve this problem if it did occur?
 3. Can I prevent this from happening? How?
- What is the best that can happen if I pursue this path?
 1. What steps can I take to ensure that the best happens?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of taking this risk?
- What are the short- and long-term consequences of the decision to me and to significant others?

Understand that fear is natural and might be part of the decision-making process. To move forward, you need to acknowledge your doubts. If you tackle them one-by-one and look at them realistically, they will often become less onerous. Ultimately, however, it is also important to listen to what your inner voice or gut is telling you: if, after you have undergone this process, a possible action doesn't feel right, you likely shouldn't do it.

If you believe that you've taken all the necessary steps and you still feel uncomfortable with your vision or are still not able to take a step forward, there may be other reasons for your inaction. If you find yourself in this situation, you may benefit from meeting with a career professional. For University of Waterloo students, employees, and alumni, Career Development appointments may be booked through the [Centre for Career Action](#) website.