

INTEGRATING YOUR INTERESTS AND CAREER GOALS IN CURRENT WORK

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You may have heard the hopeful advice: “Do what you love, the money will follow.” Please add your own reaction or response to this if none of the following fit.

- “I have not yet defined clearly what I love to do, but I have some general ideas and know that my current work doesn’t fit me as well as I’d like.”
- “I can describe what truly interests me, but it doesn’t have enough connection with what I’m doing now.”
- “All well and good, but I don’t see how I can take the risks; I have responsibilities.”
- “What I really enjoy doing will not provide adequate income.”

At this point, many people accept the status quo for a while or look for ways to escape. As you probably already learned, any source of income or vision for a satisfying vocation that honors your unique capacities and interests will not develop as quickly as a photograph. Nor, as in much of life, are your experiences likely to follow entirely a straight or logical line of progression. Along the way, be open to unanticipated possibilities that emerge. In addition to patience and persistence, try to sustain your optimism during the process. That feeling will not only provide energy to proceed, but also attract the attention of people who can help you.

Honoring the need for new challenges is important for your vitality and development. Since typical learning curves last five to seven years, you will eventually begin to feel some frustration or boredom in whatever you do. To avoid burnout and blockage, create a rhythm of refreshment that works for you. Every time you start a new learning curve, your previous experience and transferable skills will likely make the process faster and easier.

To guide you in this process of development and renewal, here are some general and specific processes. They will help you integrate your interests and career goals into your current work as well as create bridges to situations that are a better fit.

Design and choose work based on your true self. How can others provide appropriate work or make good connections for you unless you express clearly what you want to do? To reach that point, develop and make sense of information about yourself. One way to start is to gather a range of information by making lists of your top five to eight values, transferable skills that you enjoy using, interests and passions on separate index cards or with appropriate software. Then, array them so that you can see their common themes and how they complement one another. Based on that data, do research on related

activities and fields to find good fits in work. Expand your knowledge and thinking rather than confine yourself by job titles and others' expectations that may narrow your choices or force you into a mold yet again. Though instant insights would be marvelous, iterations of increasing clarity are more likely. As you are rich and complex in your experience, creativity, skills, knowledge and intuition, so is this inside-out, analysis and hunt for fits that will help you avoid detours, improve focus and find inspiration.

Remind yourself of what you have already accomplished formally and informally. Briefly describe anything you have done, within or outside work, at any age, that gives you pride. What themes and capacities do you notice that relate to your vision? What new ideas emerge? Doing this and other positive self-analysis will add to your confidence for proceeding.

Explore new ways to think about yourself, your strengths and unique qualities. Try thinking outside predictable and known categories. Two books that will help with this are:

- *The Art of Thinking* by Allen Harrison and Robert Bramson. Look especially at synthesizing which will help you think in terms of **and** not **or**.
- *7 Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Many Intelligences* by Thomas Armstrong.

This is based on the theory of multiple intelligences by Howard Gardner, a cognitive psychologist at Harvard.

Consider subjects (e.g. art, health, technology) as well as processes (e.g. conflict resolution, learning, problem-solving) that engage you. What kinds of people (e.g. teenagers, ethnic or economic groups, the elderly) attract you? Finally, identify venues and situations that appeal such as small collaborative groups, schools or large organizations. How can you integrate your preferences or bring together as many aspects as possible? Play with combinations of any or all of these categories to define immediate, medium-term and more ambitious goals.

What do you need and want to learn in order to prepare yourself for enriching what you do now and promote better directions? Consider a range of ways to develop further your knowledge, skills and abilities. They can include degrees, certificates, on-the-job training, mentor assistance (receiving and giving), apprenticeships, volunteering, workshops, conferences, internships, hobbies, independent study and special projects. If a subject or process truly engages you, the learning will probably be enjoyable most of the time.

Who can and will help you? You may already know or can find out about groups and individuals who would be pleased or at least able to help you. Through activities at and outside work as well as participation in social, religious, community and professional groups, meet and get to know new people. They may have experience that relates to your interests or know of others who do. In the process, find partners for mutual benefit. What could you offer to anyone who

may or does help you? This could include tangible assistance and information, cheerleading or “just” good listening.

Take small steps to support any goal you choose for the short, medium and long term. Put yourself in a position to aim well. Choices to consider, adapt and add to include:

- creating a more secure financial situation through planning, saving and using good advice
- doing relevant projects and activities that you start or join
- finding part-time and/or volunteer work that provide experience and contacts
- identifying possible mentors, cultivating opportunities for learning and giving back
- rotating work, preferably by doing something closer to your interests
- redesigning work with your colleagues and supervisors
- exchanging some aspects of your work for others closer to your goals
- rearranging your priorities at and outside work
- expanding duties and responsibilities to include your passions and interests
- working toward promotion that fits with your interests
- taking leave of absence or sabbatical to position yourself better for meeting your goals
- testing your assumptions and interests through study, observation and conversation
- arranging flex-time to provide opportunities to organize your time for serving your interests
- designing job sharing to give greater flexibility and options
- obtaining retraining that supports your interests
- serving as an apprentice or intern
- assisting someone who does work you like
- creating, leading or joining a task force that relates to what you'd prefer to do
- seeking short-term work assignment that takes you closer to your goal
- obtaining re-assignment that takes you in a direction that's more appealing
- engaging in informal and formal learning processes that strengthen your credibility
- exploring lateral career moves that would take you in a better direction

- doing informational interviewing to learn about how others made their way and make contacts
- seeking opportunities to do consulting work or independent projects related to your interests
- finding partners or creating a small group of people to support one another in the process of enriching current work and planning for transitions
- identifying and doing leisure activities that will add to learning and encourage new contacts
- making sure you have regular respite and play time to refresh yourself and allow space for creativity and fun

Next Steps? Perhaps all or even some of the suggestions above seem overwhelming. So start slowly with anything that strikes your fancy, keeping the following in mind:

- Choose one action that is appealing and possible to do or, at least, begin within the next week.
- Seek one or more partners for mutual support, assistance and fun.
- Block space on your calendar, not only now, but continuously, for follow-up.
- Reward yourself for any progress.
- Avoid castigating yourself when you don't do something or make a mistake. Instead just ask, "What have I learned from this that I don't want to repeat?"
- Listen to your heart, mind and intuition. If you find yourself trapped in "shoulds," rethink your approach.
- Test the authenticity of your goals and process by your levels of energy, hope and enthusiasm.

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