

Changing careers?

Changing careers is a big decision with many implications for your future in the job market. These questions will help you determine if a career change is right for you.

Thoughts of a career change can be motivated by external circumstances (such as an obvious downsizing in your industry) or an internal drive (such as a need for more challenge, or better work/life balance, or more money). Either way, changing careers is a big decision with many implications for your future. So before you draft that two-week notice, ask yourself the following questions.

1. **Do you really need a new career or just a new job?** Being able to distinguish between the two spheres is crucial. Not liking your boss, a few mundane tasks, or a certain company policy is not the same as loathing your career. Maybe, instead of changing career fields entirely, you could find a way to re-energize your current position. For instance, if the main problem is that you are bored at work, take the initiative to learn a new skill or ask to be trained in a different department or offer to take on an extra responsibility. If your current employer is not open to your suggestions and you really feel stuck, you could explore similar job opportunities in different companies. Sometimes a fresh environment is enough to recharge a career. However, if you know that the primary source of dissatisfaction will not change no matter where you do the job (for example, if the salary will never be what you want or if the workweek will always be too long or if your values are being compromised), then it is definitely time to consider a career change.
2. **Is the grass really going to be greener over there?** Although a career switch will significantly impact your life, be cautious of overstating the positive changes. A new job in itself isn't likely to make the skies bluer, your thighs thinner, and your dog smarter. The truth is that miserable people often bring their misery to their new careers, and generally positive people tend to be so regardless of their circumstances. So carefully consider the reasons for a career change and make sure your expectations are realistic.
3. **What do you want really?** Self-assessment is the first step to finding a good career fit. You've probably spent hours ruminating over what you don't like about your current field; now think about what you would like. A good brainstorming activity is to list your interests, values, and skills. Although this exercise will probably not point you directly to a possible job title, it may help you identify some areas to explore further. You can find several good books or online tests to help you with this process. For even more personalized assistance, consider working with a career counselor. These resources will help you develop a list of potential career fields.
4. **What do you know about your potential career fields?** After discovering (or rediscovering) yourself, you need to research potential career fields. In this information age, available research on any career field is plentiful. Start with the internet. Do a

search using the name of the career field and the word "association" or "organization" and you'll likely come up with good sites written for professionals in that field. Peruse those Web sites for information on the current "hot topics" of the field, trends in the industry, and what the people in the field are saying about their jobs.

5. **Do you know anyone who works in your fields of interest?** Books and the Internet are great resources for general information, but your most valuable research could come from someone who actually works in the field. A thirty-minute meeting can uncover what a typical day is really like; whether your skills, interests, and values mesh with the field; and even suggestions as to how you might break into the field. Use your friends, family, and acquaintances to locate someone who might be willing to offer you this kind of insight. Most people like talking about themselves, and if they enjoy their work, they will likely agree to meet with you to talk about it.
6. **How will your quality of life change?** Most people change careers because they believe their quality of life will considerably increase. Look at the big picture and consider more than just the salary issue. Although you may make more money, will you be working more hours? Are you fully aware of and open to the potential sacrifices, trade-offs, and overall changes in terms of the stress level, workweek, culture, and adjustments to your self-identity? For example, a career in real estate may mean more flexible hours than your current 8 to 5 job, but you may need to be available morning, noon, and night every day of the week to meet with potential sellers and buyers.
7. **Do you have the skills necessary for the new field?** Many people resist changing careers because they mistakenly believe that a new college degree is necessary. It's true that many professions require specific credentials that can be earned only through formal schooling (a nurse, for example, must have a nursing degree). However, for many career changers, a degree is simply not required. You may be able to learn a specialized skill through an online course. Maybe your local college offers certification courses for your chosen field. Perhaps you can volunteer to learn on the job. And don't minimize the importance of your transferable skills. Effective communication and problem-solving skills, for instance, are qualities that employers seek for countless positions.
8. **Do you have a realistic plan and support to act on it?** You can't expect to quit one job today and land the "perfect" job tomorrow. In addition to conducting all of the research outlined above, your action plan should include issues such as how you will handle finances during the transition, how you will obtain any needed education or training, when and where you will seek employment, and what steps you will take to ensure success in the new field. You may want to enlist the help of a mentor to navigate these issues. Certainly, since this change will not occur in a vacuum, make sure you have your spouse's support too.
9. **Will you be able to convince a hiring manager that you are a good fit?** The last thing a career changer wants is to be pigeonholed into the old job. Can you market yourself as a viable candidate in the new field? For starters, your resume should highlight the job-



specific training, skills, and experience, if you have any. In addition, make a strong case for those transferable skills that you have successfully used in your past jobs. You may want to hire a professional resume writer to help you write this all-important document. Then, at the interview, draw on all that research you've been doing to speak knowledgably about the career field, the relevant skills and traits that you bring to the table, and how you will benefit the employer.

10. **Are you really ready to make the move?** You may never feel completely comfortable taking the plunge to a new career. In light of all of the information you have gathered, ask yourself if the costs and rewards of staying where you are outweigh the potential costs and rewards of moving. If changing careers still seems to be the right direction but you need a little push first, consider temping, volunteering, or working part-time in the new job for a little while first. Finally, when all the facts are in, make your decision.

As you know, the career you choose will impact almost every area of your life to some degree. So use these questions as a guide to help you choose well.