

Planning for Your Future

Introduction

This article looks at how to go about making decisions on what to do in the future. Should you stay on at school, go to college, get a job or do some vocational training?

The first thing to say is: don't panic! It's quite normal to feel confused by the huge range of options and information available. What you need is a way of sorting through all the ideas and information. Even if you know what you want to do, it can often seem like the path to get there isn't very clear. So again, a few starters to help clear the way should be useful.

Where to start

Perhaps the best place to start thinking about your future is to look at where you are now - and who you are! This means asking yourself lots of questions.

Start with school.

- Which subjects do you enjoy most?
- Which subjects do you dislike?
- Which examinations have you passed or do you expect to pass?
- Which projects and assignments are you proud of?
- Do you like learning new things?
- Do you like learning by studying or by doing?

Then, think about your skills.

- Can you make a list of your skills?
- What are you like at organising people or events?
- What are your communication skills like, eg, in talking, listening, writing, foreign languages?
- Do you have any IT skills?
- Do you have any practical skills – anything from drawing to fixing bikes to cooking?

When you've made a list of all your skills, think about which ones you most enjoy using.

Now, consider your personality.

- Do you get on well with people?
- Are you ambitious?
- Are you reliable?
- How do you feel about deadlines?
- Are you practical?

- Do you like responsibility?
- Do you like learning new skills?
- Do you like new situations and challenges?
- Could you work on your own or in a team?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?

And, finally, look at your interests and the things that matter to you.

- What do you do in your spare time?
- Do you like painting, reading, playing an instrument, sport, carpentry, gardening, watching films, listening to bands, or something else?
- What do you want out of life: money, excitement, challenge, fulfilment, security, job satisfaction, success, travel, adventure, status, etc?

Working your way through these questions should help you to get a clearer picture of the kind of person you are and the things you like doing. This will be useful when you start to think about what you might want to do next.

The next step

In the future, your choice could be to:

- carry on in education or training
- gain an apprenticeship
- take a 'gap year', eg, to travel or do voluntary work.

Your choice could depend on how you answered the earlier questions.

It's important to think long-term, as much as you can. For example, you might be happy to go straight into work and earn money as quickly as you can. However, you need to think about your future prospects too. Will you be able to train in the job, to gain new skills? What are the opportunities for promotion like?

If you want to carry on with your education, you need to think about whether you want to learn a practical, vocational subject, like engineering, or an academic one, like history.

If you plan to travel or to do some unpaid voluntary work here or in other countries as part of a 'gap year', you will need to do some careful planning and save up enough money to support your plan.

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Whatever the case, if you know what you want to do and where you want to be in a few years' time, you should spend some time thinking about what you need to do in order to get there.

If you don't know what to do, make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the three choices. And remember, these can be both long- and short-term.

Choosing a career

You might feel like staying on in education mainly because you don't know what kind of work to do. However, sooner or later you'll need to start to try to make a decision.

You're likely to spend a large part of your life at work, so it's a good idea to start finding out about different jobs.

You could make a list of jobs you are interested in, then look into them in more detail. If you don't know where to start, look out for articles in magazines and newspapers about people and the jobs they do.

Your school will have careers information you can use, and so will your Connexions service and local library. Ask yourself what you think about the job and whether you could do it.

Find out which skills and qualifications are needed in these jobs and make sure your information is up to date. You can get information on careers in a number of ways. You can:

- Find information in careers libraries, e.g. at school or at your local Connexions service.
- Talk to careers/personal advisers and careers teachers.
- Ask people about their work.
- Talk to friends and family.
- Use a software program such as Kudos that can match you to suitable careers.
- Get relevant work experience.

Wherever you get your information and advice from, remember that only you can make any decisions about it.

If somebody tells you something bad about a job, you could make a note of it in a list of disadvantages for that job. Then, try to think of any advantages to balance out the disadvantages.

Once you have a list of jobs or courses that you might want to do, think about how you match up. Ask yourself:

- Do you have or expect to get the right qualifications?
- Are you missing any relevant skills?
- Do you have the right personal qualities?
- Is your family pressurising you to do something else?

Try not to make decisions straight away when you hear or read a piece of information. Instead, make a note of it and continue to gather information.

Once you have as much as you feel you need, read through it all and then put it to one side for a few days. If any ideas come to you in this time, write them down and put them with your information.

After a few days, think about your decision. Then, look through your information again and see if you still feel comfortable with your decision.

Other things to consider

It would be a lot simpler if all you had to think about was whether to continue studying or to get a job. But, there are other things that will affect what you do and your decisions will have an effect on other parts of your life.

For example, do you want to leave home, and if so, when? Getting a job might be the quickest route to leaving home but another way is to go to college or university, even if this means hanging on for a few more years.

What if you don't get the grades you want? Will you retake or will you put studying behind you (for now at least)? This is where it's important to have some flexibility in your planning for the future.

There are probably a lot of other things that you need to consider that are unique to you. Try making a list of things that you feel are important to consider.

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Writing an action plan

Hopefully, by now you'll feel more confident about planning your future. You'll be aware of the issues to think about, the sources of information and ways of looking at your choices.

Of course, you still need to make sense of everything, so this is where writing an action plan comes in handy. It's a good way of getting your thoughts down on paper.

You can list your skills, note down the things that are important to you and the things you want to get out of your work or study. You can set out your short- and long-term goals and the steps you need to take to achieve them.

But remember, your action plan is only a framework - you need to review it regularly, adding new information and changing it if you need to.

The way you actually write your plan is up to you. After all, no one else has to see it. And what's longterm or short-term is up to you. If you want to plan only up to the next year, that's fine. But make sure your plan includes all the information you feel is important to your future. It will be a handy reference tool when you discuss career options with careers/personal advisers or other professionals.

Glossary of terms

Vocational

Work-related.