developing Employ**ability**

Learning Object: Building A Career With Creativity And Resilience

This learning object includes four items:

1. A career profile featuring internationally acclaimed author Liz Byrski;
2. A tool, for use with students, on how to learn from biographies;
3. A snapshot on the work of writing graduates; and
4. A career visioning tool for use with students.

CAREER PROFILE

Author and educator Liz Byrski believes that there are many ways of being prepared for the workforce. From the context of writing and publishing, she shared five strategies for students to consider: Be realistic; open up options for work by acquiring marketable skills; read widely across a range of publications; be professional; and be persistent. The career profile expands on each of these, providing opportunities for students to define each of these for themselves and to imagine how they might utilise each strategy to build their future careers.

LEARNING FROM BIOGRAPHIES

The career profile from Liz illustrates that in a world of rapid change, people come under the influence of circumstances that create new experiences and challenges from which they can continue to learn throughout their lives. This encompasses more than just taking courses in the framework of continuing professional development; it is clearly to establish how students and graduates can strengthen their identities as entrepreneurial and reflective professionals. One of the most powerful ways of illustrating this is with the narratives of professionals with diverse career paths. The biography tool includes sample questions for students to use with a range of biographies across multiple disciplines and contexts.

SNAPSHOT OF WORK FOR WRITING GRADUATES

Careers for graduates in disciplines such as writing, IT, management, humanities, and the arts are often complex and diverse. The writing graduate snapshot includes a one-page summary for discussion with students, together with further reading and links to resources relevant to the writing discipline.

CAREER VISIONING TOOL

Career visioning, thinking about future life and career, is an essential component of developing employability and life-career goals. This tool includes questions for students to consider on their own, in discussion with others, or even in written form. The questions and their answers have profound practical implications for career choice and the amount of satisfaction likely to be gained within those careers; however, they can also be overwhelming. As such, the tool also includes a short (though macabre) strategy for opening the conversation with students.

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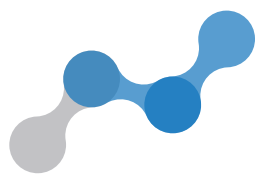
CAREER STORIES

Building A Career With Creativity And Resilience

How do I write a novel? I find a theme that inspires me, then hope the characters 'show up'.

LIZ'S STORY

Internationally acclaimed author Liz Byrski grew up in England and wanted to become a writer; however, her parents advised her to get "a real job". The result was a secretarial course followed by employment as a secretary, during which she made her way into professional journalism by writing stories and selling them to newspapers and magazines. Arriving in Western Australia in 1981, Liz established herself as a freelance writer and then became a broadcaster with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). She then spent time in government, where she wrote speeches and media releases, and later she returned to the ABC as a broadcaster and executive producer.

Concurrent with her journalistic work, Liz wrote ten non-fiction books and developed her skills and reputation as a teacher. From 1984 to 1988, she worked as a sessional (hourly paid) tutor in print journalism at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), which became Curtin University in 1967. A decade later, Liz returned to Curtin as an adjunct teaching fellow and once again taught as a sessional tutor. She was initially reluctant to take a full-time academic position because of the time it would take away from her writing practice, but in 2001 she accepted a position as coordinator of the professional writing and research major and began to balance her time between teaching, research, and writing. Family responsibilities and the need to earn a living had prevented Liz from completing an undergraduate degree. With the move into academia she enrolled in a doctoral program and obtained her PhD in only two years.

Without any formal training in writing, Liz recalls that she had always wanted to write fiction but she didn't know how to start. Having decided to "*just have a go*", her first novel Gang of Four was published in 2004 when Liz was aged 60. Since then she has published three non-fiction books and many novels, as well as academic articles and book reviews.
Liz retired from Curtin University in 2017, she had taught in the Professional Writing and Publishing program, co-ordinated the Creative Practice HDR Students' Network and the Curtin Writing Network and Directed the Australia China Writing Centre. She also supervises seven PhD students. Liz explains that the social contact with staff and students is a wonderful contrast to the isolation of work as a writer. The routine of her university work also adds "*structure*" to her life.

CAREERS IN WRITING

After 50 years as a writer and broadcaster, and 13 in higher education, Liz has a wealth of connections in government, business and industry, including many graduates who work as professional writers in a range of roles and sectors. She reflects that careers in writing have changed significantly over that time. The internet, for example, has revolutionised the production, marketing, and consumption of fiction. This has both advantages and disadvantages for writers: "*It is a place where work can be seen and get noticed, but unfortunately often without being paid*".

Publishers watch writers' blogs and this can sometimes lead to the recognition of new talent that they can develop. Whilst it is harder than ever for emerging writers to be published in print, e-books provide new and exciting possibilities for publication. Today, many new books that appear in print have first proved successful online. These might otherwise not have made it to publication due to the increasingly high costs of print publishing. Some genres such as science fiction are now primarily published in e-book form.

The biggest uptake of e-books is among women over 45, and many much older readers like e-books because they are lighter to hold and because the font size can be changed. Being cheaper to produce, e-books can be used to gauge demand before committing to print. For example, Liz's short book Getting On: Some Thoughts on Women and Ageing was first published online before coming out in print with Momentum (2012).

The print run for most published literary novels by new authors is 2000 - 5000 copies. Royalties are most often 10% of the cover price and it may take five years to sell the print run, so there is little money to be made. To maximize their income from different formats and publishers, many successful authors write in multiple styles and genres under different names. Commercial mass market/genre fiction can sell in tens of thousands - a dramatic comparison to literary fiction.

In general, publishers are always looking for something fresh and different with something new to say or a new angle on an old story. Fashions change, but publishers look for really good writing appropriate to the genre, well informed, and soundly researched. Book publishers look for books that suit their various lists and categories, and magazine editors look for material written in the style of the publication, to the usual length for the publication, and of relevance to the magazine's profile.

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING A CAREER IN WRITING

We asked Liz to respond to a number of questions about building and sustaining a career in writing. She told us that "*it is very hard to make a living writing fiction or poetry!*" and that many creative writing students graduate with no idea how to make a living from writing. This was one of the factors that influenced the development of a program in professional writing and publishing, which delivers skills that enable graduates to make a living from writing while still developing their creative work.

Liz explained that there are many ways of being prepared for the workforce, and she shared six strategies for students to consider. Be realistic; open up options for work by acquiring marketable skills; read widely across a range of publications; be professional; be persistent; and get experience. In the following section we expand on each of these.

Be Realistic

Liz suggests that students' expectations of a writing career can be entirely unrealistic.

"*A lot of students who come into creative writing think they will leave and be able to write a novel and be paid a lot of money for it*". This can happen, she says, but it's rare. "*Don't be precious*" is the advice Liz gives to students and graduates. This means being prepared as a graduate to take less glamorous jobs that develop one's writing.

Liz recalls having done plenty of "*boring*" writing jobs. These include installation manuals, real estate reviews and, once, a whole edition of a popular lifestyle magazine with each article written under a different pseudonym! She advocates for educators to give students a "*clear sense of what they can expect from their degrees*". This includes discussing a range of occupations in which graduates have been successful, also listing some of the employers.

Open Up Options For Work By Acquiring Marketable Skills

Liz's second tip is to acquire a broad range of marketable skills that are related to one's creative goals. This opens up many more options for work: "*It is hard to make a living from creative writing but you can make a living from professional writing*". This, she explains, is better than "*pouring cappuccinos*" for a living because it enables writers to practice their craft and polish their writing skills.

In Liz's experience, students who have studied professional writing and publishing are highly employable:

> Employers are desperate for well-informed staff who can write well across a range of forms and genres and can be relied upon to produce intelligent, error free copy. There are many really interesting jobs in the State and Commonwealth Public Service, local government, the arts, business and industry, in which students can develop high-level careers.

Liz recommends all creative writing students to add some professional writing knowledge and competency to their skills base: "*If they work in professional writing they are still developing skills that will enhance their creative work*".

Liz advises students to explore the full range of available electives and think about which might help them develop knowledge of professional writing and editing from which they can build a portfolio of written,

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preferably published, material to show to potential employers. These electives might, for example, focus on feature writing, workplace writing, promotional writing, editing and advanced editing. These are marketable skills with which creative writing graduates can earn their living as writers whilst working on their novels, poetry, or other creative work.

Read Widely Across A Range Of Publications

In addition to electives and work placements, students should learn to write in a range of different forms and genres so that they are multi-skilled writers. This means reading widely across a range of publications: fiction and non-fiction books; feature articles; reports; travel writing; reviews; essays; short stories; and promotional materials. Students who read across a range of publications learn the elements, tone, language register, and structure of different forms of writing, with a view of being able to move across genres when necessary. A broad approach to critical reading also helps to develop general knowledge, which is vital for writers in every genre.

Be Professional

Discipline is just as important as talent! Being professional means "*delivering on time and in the form that you've promised it*". Working strenuously to develop knowledge of grammar, syntax, punctuation, and sentence structure, enables people to edit their own work and submit it free of errors.

Be Persistent

Writers need "*staying power and persistence*" to deal with the many inevitable rejections. Very few writers are lucky in their first attempt; Liz has been rejected "*heaps of times*" and she laughs as she says that it doesn't stop happening. Highly successful authors such as Tim Winton take years to earn anything from their writing. She says, and then the income is often from awards and prize money rather than sales. Liz notes that popular fiction sells far better than other forms of books, but that writers of popular fiction are less likely to reap prize money or to gain the same "*level of respect*".

Get Experience

Graduates from the degree programs in which Liz has been involved have an excellent record of gaining employment as writers. Liz attributes this to the practical focus of the programs and to students' practical placements, which are undertaken within the media, mainstream industry, publishers and non-government organisations.

For more information about Liz Byrski, please visit lizbyrski.com.

Learning from career stories and biographies

When working with biographies and career stories, it is useful for students to refer to questions that will guide their reading. These questions can be developed utilising some of the other resources, particularly those focused on identity, preferences, and goals. However, the questions overleaf will give students a head start.

Lifelong learning can be described as a concept spanning an entire lifetime in a process of "transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and the senses" (Jarvis, 2002, p. 60). This learning includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that extend well beyond formal education. In a world of rapid change, people come under the influence of circumstances that create new experiences and challenges from which they can continue to learn throughout their lives. The lifelong learning concept goes further than 'permanent education'; its innovative dimension lies in a new approach to the process and context of learning.

Graduates need to be lifelong learners in order to adapt to continuous change. This encompasses more than just taking courses in the framework of continuing professional development. It is important to establish how new graduates can strengthen their identities as entrepreneurial and reflective professionals. One of the most powerful ways of illustrating this is with the narratives of professionals with diverse career paths.

You can access career stories here.

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SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?

2. What does this biography suggest you might need to do in order to keep learning?

3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?

4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:

    a. Who played a significant role at these times?

    b. To whom did you go to for advice?

    c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?

5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:

    a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?

    b. What is the first step, and when will you begin?

6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. What is the relationship between your interests and your future work?

7. What might you look like as a professional?

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INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

What Do We Know About The Work Of Writing Graduates?

The 2013 Australian Graduate Survey collected data from 4,360 graduates from Communication and Media Studies degrees. Data was collected between four and six months after graduation.

POPULATION

Data was collected from graduates with the following characteristics:

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Male	1,367	31.4
Female	2,993	68.6
Median age	23	-
First language English	3,445	79.0
First language Other	793	18.2
Graduate from undergraduate degree	3,576	82.0
Graduate from postgraduate degree	737	16.9

OVERALL OUTCOMES

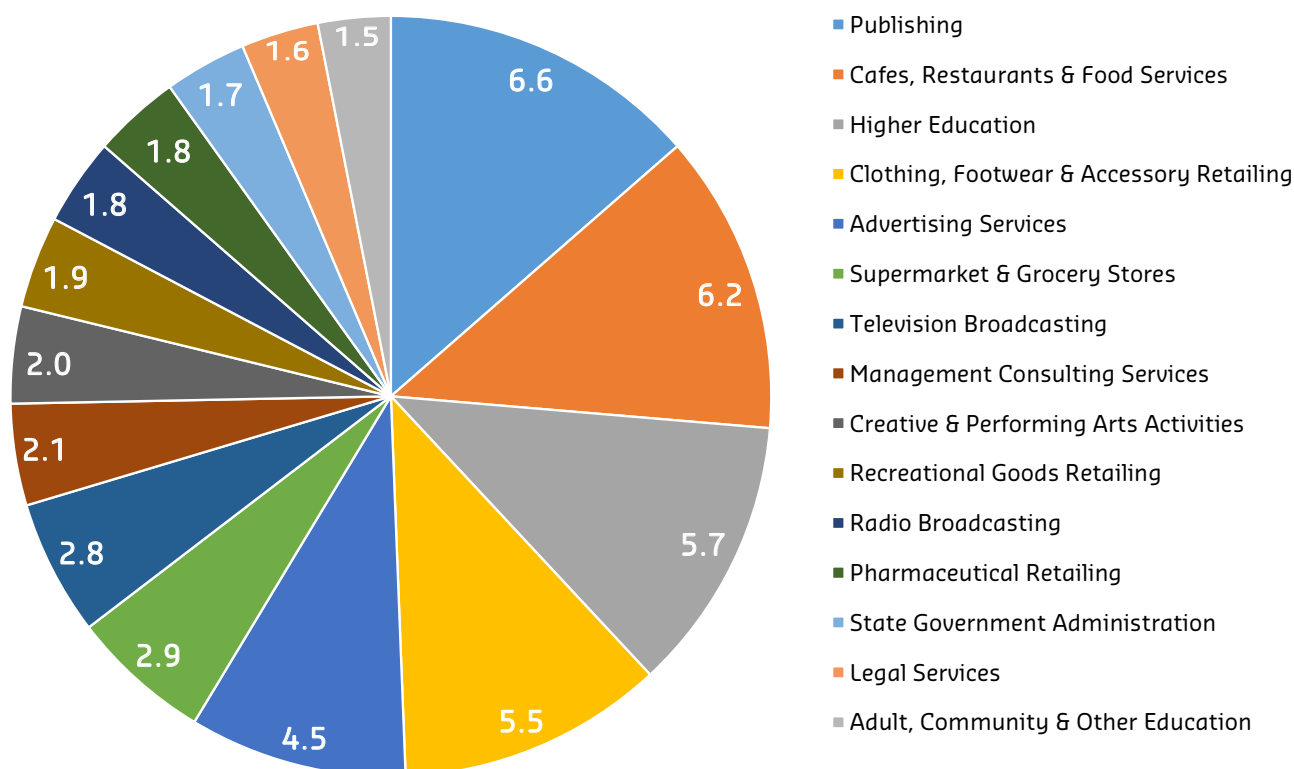| Status	Number	Percentage
Full-time work	1,567	36.4
Part-time work	1,625	37.8
Self-employed	261	8.4
Studying full-time	742	17.4
Studying part-time	211	4.8

Overall, 36.4 per cent of graduates were working full-time, 37.8 per cent were working part-time and 8.4 per cent were self-employed. In relation to studying, 17.4 per cent were studying full-time and 4.8 per cent were studying part-time.

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EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

Of the 3,192 graduates who were working, whether part-time, full-time, or self-employed, the largest area of employment was publishing, accounting for 6.6 per cent of graduates. Other graduates were distributed across multiple employment areas.

The chart below illustrates just those areas in which at least 1.5 per cent of graduates were employed:

- Publishing
- Cafes, Restaurants & Food Services
- Higher Education
- Clothing, Footwear & Accessory Retailing
- Advertising Services
- Supermarket & Grocery Stores
- Television Broadcasting
- Management Consulting Services
- Creative & Performing Arts Activities
- Recreational Goods Retailing
- Radio Broadcasting
- Pharmaceutical Retailing
- State Government Administration
- Legal Services
- Adult, Community & Other Education

FURTHER STUDY

Of the 910 graduates who were undertaking further study, 44.7 per cent were studying in the field of creative arts (including communication and media studies) and 22.9 per cent were in the field of society and culture.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on the outcomes of graduates from Writing degrees, please visit QILT and http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/

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WHAT IS THE BROADER EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT?

Writing programs have undergone an international expansion since the 1990s. However, there still seems to be little understanding about the reality of earning a living as a writer (Bennett & Robertson, 2015).

Whilst officially we know very little about the destinations of professional writing graduates in Australia (Baverstock, 2007), we know anecdotally that graduates work across associated professions and industries including public relations, advertising, communications, government, information technology, publishing, administration and journalism.

Australian labour force data in related occupations suggest that employment levels in these sectors are fairly static (Figure 1), and yet the number of students and graduates in Australia has more than doubled since the late 1990s (Australian Government, 2013). It is likely, therefore, that a growing proportion of writing graduates need to work in multiple concurrent roles and/or both within and beyond traditional destinations.
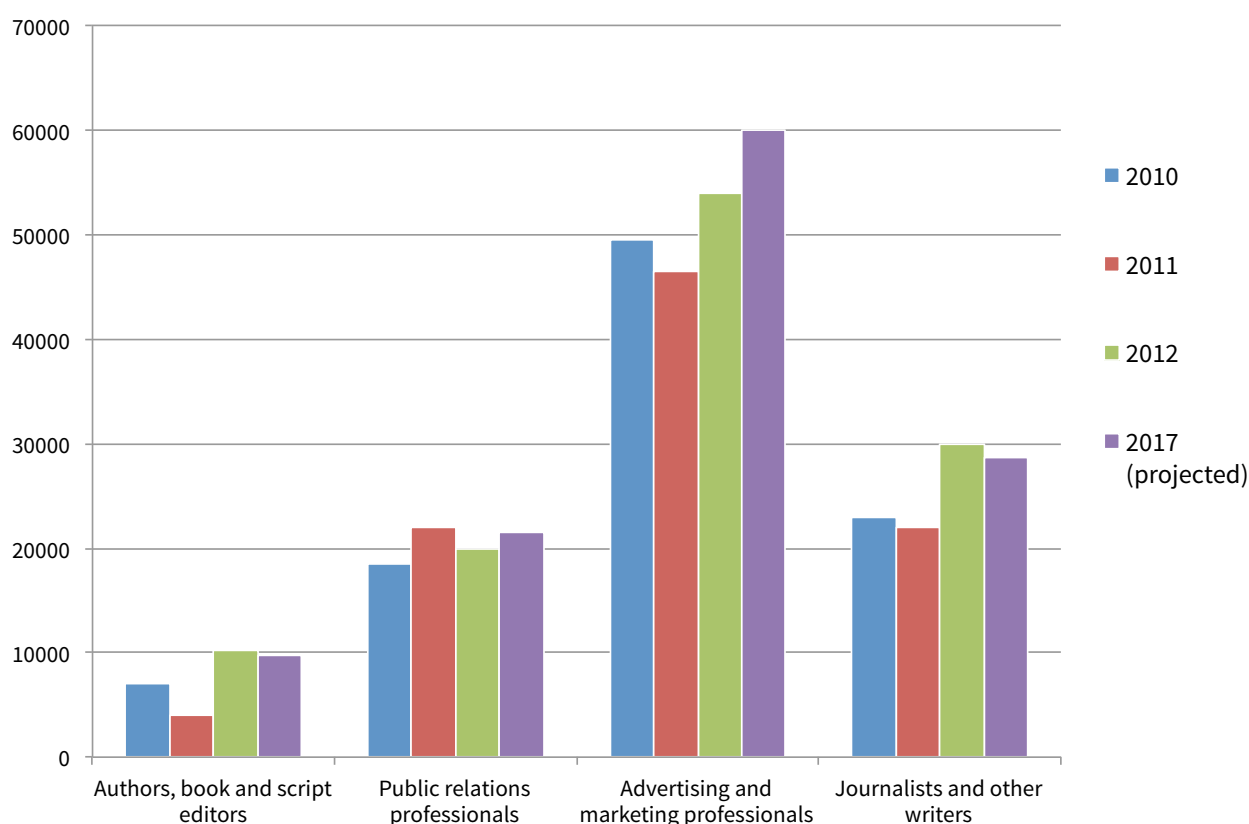

Figure 1: Historical/projected ABS Labour (1,000s) from http://joboutlook.gov.au

Writing graduates who hold multiple concurrent roles will also tend to self-manage their careers and to create their own work opportunities through reputation building and networking (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Bridgstock, 2009).

This often means moving across the boundaries of employers, clients and task orientations, between different employment arrangements, and between traditional, online and digital environments (Daskalaki, 2010) into roles which in some cases did not exist five years earlier (Bennett & Robinson, 2015).

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Writers are likely to cross the boundaries of employment several times during their careers. This means that students need to learn the concept of life-long learning.

2. In most workplaces, writers must produce texts amidst distractions such as phones, disruptive co-workers and writing deadlines. These conditions can be vastly different than university, so students benefit from early and regular industry exposure.

3. Writing graduates often cite lack of experience with producing texts other than those that are part of academic requirements. Effective writers must quickly adapt to the style, length and content of texts required. For the successful accomplishment of writing tasks in both higher education and professional settings, situation specific types of writing knowledge need to be operationalised, and links made between general and specific knowledge (Beaufort, 1999).

4. Publications form the basis of a writer's career or reputation. Janssen (1998) goes as far as proposing that the literary "status" of writers is strongly dependent on the critical attention given to their writing in daily and weekly press. In other words, being considered a writer depends on publications rather than on academic qualifications or other formal criteria. At the student level, publications and other examples of writing can be illustrated through a digital portfolio

5. Graduates need to be able to interact with others in order to manage team-based work and professional networks. These skills can be developed in class, and in part-time work and volunteer roles, as well as during industry placements relating to writing.

6. Janssen (1998) notes that writers who are active in several areas may have a better chance of attracting the critics' attention than those who publish only in book form. A similar argument could be made for attracting the attention of potential employers and publishers.

7. Duhé and Zukowski's (1997) analysis of the broadcast curriculum found that individuals with hiring authority favour a polished résumé with journalism skills over an academic degree. Similarly, television news broadcasters looked for experience over education. However, graduates who can illustrate both will be best placed to find work.

8. Robertson (2011) reviewed employer expectations of professional writing and publishing graduates and concluded that employers of all sizes and in all industries require graduates with high-level generic skills.

9. Robertson (2011) also predicted a rise in demand for generalist communicators and writers, and for highly skilled communications graduates able to meet the demands of digital publishing, social media and other developing technologies. Specifically, "on-line writing, editing and publishing skills are key skills which will be in demand in the future in Australia and internationally" (p.2).

These studies highlight the need to ensure that students have sufficient industry experience and that they are able to evidence their work in each setting. In line with this, a toolkit has been developed containing resources designed to help educators to address the themes of self and career literacy.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

Capstone case study from Curtin University (Professional Writing Program)

Research report on employer expectations (Rachel Robertson, 2011)

ePortfolio summary slides from the Curtin project

Learning guides and resources used within the capstone

Developing Employability Tools to engage students with thinking about identity and employability

FURTHER READING

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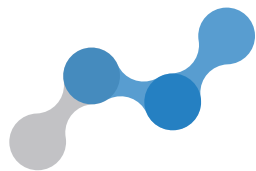
TOOLKIT

Finding Your Mission

Whether we think about the following questions on our own, in discussion with others, or even in written form, they are important philosophical questions. They are important because the answers have profound practical implications for the career choices we make, and the amount of satisfaction we are likely to gain within those careers. It is important to revisit questions such as these regularly throughout the career lifespan.

1. What do you want to achieve in your career?

2. How do you want to connect with others through your work?

3. How can your work be of value to the community?

4. Have you been inspired by examples of work becoming a force for change?

5. If so, reflect on the meaning they might have for your own career.

6. What is your mission? In other words, what do you most value? How do you want to contribute to making the world a better place?

HEADSTONE ACTIVITY

A fun (though macabre) way to think about this is to think about how you would like to be remembered.
What would you like your obituary to say?
What would you like someone to say at your funeral?
What would you like to see written on your headstone?

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