

Career story: Changing career

This career story comes from a visual arts graduate who decided to work in another sector even before graduation. The account is a great resource for understanding uneasiness about future work and the transfer of skills and knowledge to new settings. When reading the career story, reflect on what you have learnt in your degree and how this can help you when making career decisions.

At the back of the resource, you will find more information as well as sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.

Geoff's story

Sometimes, learning about an industry before graduating can help you decide not to pursue a career.

Geoff is a great example of someone who does a degree that is closely tied to industry and, instead of being drawn into it, decides against it. In Geoff's case, learning a lot about the industry led him to be certain he didn't want to continue in that career once he had graduated.

Geoff was passionate about visual arts practice and wanted to do the best degree possible. To get into his chosen university, he did a short folio course with an independent design school. This helped him create a folio of his best artwork.

Geoff was offered positions in visual arts degrees by three universities and he accepted the one with the best reputation. His degree covered a variety of visual arts topics including typography, visual merchandising (advertising), art using the computer medium, and anatomical drawing.

Learning about the industry before graduating can help a student decide not to pursue a career as well as help them develop the skills for it.

The lecturers in Geoff's degree were well-connected with the visual arts industry; most were part-time academics whose main role was in visual arts. He learned a lot about the industry through their direct experience.

The visual arts degree was closely integrated with industry and the academics were artists in their own right. Geoff learned most about the industry by getting to know his teachers.

During his studies, Geoff won one of 20 scholarships to attend an eight-week intensive program in Prato (Italy), the heart of the Italian Renaissance. The scholarship was quite an achievement as 300 people had applied for the places, and it gave him the experience of a total immersion in the arts. He also secured direct industry experience by doing freelance work, including commissions for a new café and a landscaping business.

Industry experience gave Geoff important skills and helped him learn first-hand about the nature of visual arts practice.

Despite his success, Geoff's passion for visual art diminished as he was doing his degree. He found the degree studies a "grind" with the constant pressure and multiple projects, all with a deadline. Geoff realised that his future in the industry would be similar: multiple projects and constant deadlines.

Geoff found that there was no room to create and to be a perfectionist, as had been his dream. He also realised that salaries in the visual arts were low; he estimated that it would be difficult for an artist to earn much above the minimum wage unless the artist was exceptional.

The detailed knowledge Geoff learned about the industry through his degree made him decide not to pursue a career in it.

By the end of his degree, Geoff had decided that a career in visual arts was not for him. He was not entirely certain what he would do, and like many graduates he continued for a while in the roles he had held whilst a student. Geoff continued his work at a pub (bar) and eventually he became the gaming manager. Although he didn't see this work as a long-term objective, Geoff recalls that it paid the bills and gave him great work experience.

Working in a pub gave Geoff something vital: experience at handling responsibility through his role as the gaming manager.

One thing which had been constant through Geoff's life was his dedication to personal fitness. This led him to complete a three-month course through which he qualified as a personal trainer. Geoff found that he had a flair for personal training, and he has since established a thriving business with up to 80 personal training clients each week.

It took Geoff a little while to decide what to do instead of visual arts. In the end, Geoff pursued his other passion: personal fitness.

By establishing his own business, Geoff was able to pursue his visual arts interests on his own terms. He also saw it as an important skill to maintain for the future. As he said:

"You never know what might happen! I could be injured and no longer able to work as a personal trainer."

Geoff is one of many graduates who transfer their skills and experience to different settings. He took the time to 'learn the practice' of visual arts and made the decision that he did not want to juggle multiple, time-intensive projects in which he might have limited creative input.

Rather, he employed his entrepreneurial thinking and created his own business. The business has enabled Geoff to maintain and develop his skills as a visual artist without the need to please a client base, and he has positioned it as a possible career into the future.

Many graduates go on to work in sectors unrelated to their degree studies; indeed, the average person holds five different careers!

At the core of these careers is the desire to create meaningful work and a lifestyle that achieves our personal goals. These are fluid, so take the time to revisit them often.

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you 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 challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Sarah Richardson, Philip MacKinnon, Marian Mahat, Lisa Schmidt and Dawn Bennett.