



Career myths and how to debunk them

by Olivia Crosby

Most people make assumptions about careers.

Often, these assumptions are based on impressions they get from relatives and friends, from television shows, and from workers and jobs that they see in their daily lives.

Impressions are a good place to start when looking for a career because they help people to identify possibilities. But at the same time, impressions can be misleading. They show only a small portion of reality, or worse: no reality at all. That's when career impressions become career myths.

People make all kinds of false assumptions—about an occupation's working conditions, job duties, educational requirements, employment prospects, and more—because they have limited information. For example, many people think that there are no opportunities in the manufacturing trades, that all high-paying jobs require a college degree, and that most teachers earn below-average salaries. None of these myths is true. And believing myths like these limits career choices unnecessarily.

Chances are that you harbor myths and stereotypes about careers. And you might not even realize that you do. Some myths are easily dismissed; others interfere with your ability to develop career goals. (See the box, "Career myths that stop people cold," on page 5.)

You can keep myths from derailing your career search by learning to confirm your beliefs or expose your

misconceptions for what they are. Expand your options and uncover the truth about each career. Reality tools—including statistics, expert advice, and real-world experiences—can supply the facts.

Moving beyond myths: Expand your career options

Career myths can cause you to overlook many possibilities. Sometimes, people don't realize that a career exists; art majors might not be aware that they have an excellent background for industrial design or medical photography, for example. Other times, people exclude a known career based on false impressions. Librarians' reputation for being quiet and studious, for example, belies the fast-paced, high-tech environment of modern libraries.

Don't let myths get in the way when you're trying to pinpoint your ideal career. Instead, look beyond your first thoughts to expand and explore the possibilities.

Identify more possibilities

How can you keep misconceptions from limiting your options? For starters, seek guidance from objective sources to increase the number and type of occupations that you consider.

Assessment tests—offered online, in career guidance books, and in career centers—help you to identify potential careers, based on your answers to specific questions. Some tests measure how closely your answers match those of workers who are already in an occupation. Other

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You think you know, but you could be wrong. Don't be a victim of your own misconceptions. Here's how to uncover the truth about careers.

tests match occupations to your personality type, skills, or interests. (See the “Getting help” section at the end of this article for links to online assessment resources.)

Even those tests can narrow career choices unnecessarily, however. Comprehensive guides, such as the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, profile many occupations of all types. Skimming these guides can jog interest in a career that you might not have considered.

Other career guides, books, and articles describe careers that relate to an interest, skill, or hobby—such as baking pastries, caring for pets, or programming computers. Reading these resources can help people learn about occupations and lesser-known specialties.

Investigate—don't eliminate—options

When developing a list of possibilities, don't dismiss occupations too quickly. Career counselors say that many people eliminate good choices before considering them. And usually the reasons for doing so are based on what these people *think* they know about a career, instead of on what they actually know.

For example, students who are looking for high-paying work without going to college might overlook construction trades if they think that all of those jobs require physical strength. But technology now allows machines, not muscles, to tackle heavy jobs—and besides, plenty of occupations (electrician, drafter, and cost estimator, to name a few) offer high pay without requiring significant physical exertion. Similarly, students who have an interest in acting often reject it as a career if they

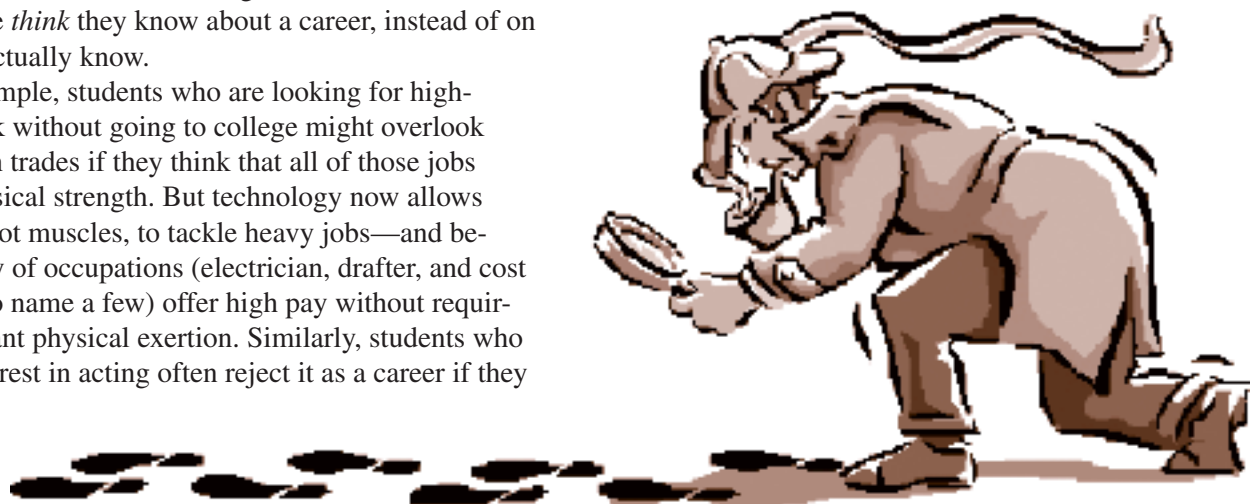
don't want to move to California, not realizing that about 60 percent of acting jobs are in other cities.

As examples like these show, there might be ways to pursue a career even if part of that career seems unappealing. If you like enough parts of an occupation, don't let one aspect of it dissuade you too quickly from exploring it further. Look into how the occupation varies in different work settings or in different industries.

Getting to the truth

Getting to the truth of career myths requires that you find accurate information from reliable sources. In other words, you need to do a little sleuth work.

Look in more than one place to get an accurate picture of a career. Statistics about occupations and industries give facts about earnings, employment, and other numeric issues. Employment projections give



insight into the future. Informational interviewing reveals the benefits, drawbacks, and job options in an occupation. And getting experience provides hands-on understanding of what it's like to do a job.

Each of these methods yields myth-busting information, but each has limitations.

Career statistics

How much do fish and game wardens earn in Minnesota? How safe is it to be a nursing aide? How many flight attendants have a college degree? These and other questions are answered by survey data, which provide objective insight into occupations you're considering.

Statistics are the best place to look for concrete facts about workers' earnings, average hours of work, education levels, and rates of on-the-job injuries, as well as the number of jobs in an area and the types of work settings that are available.

If you want to be a teacher but don't relish the idea of managing a traditional classroom, for example, statistics will show that 22,000 elementary school teachers worked outside of schools in 2004; if you're worried about their earnings, you'll discover that 10 percent of elementary school teachers earned more than \$67,930. And although most lawyers keep long hours, statistics show that more than 25 percent worked 40 or fewer hours a week in 2004.

Don't be fooled. Statistics might not lie, but they can be misleading. The accuracy of surveys depends on how they were conducted. A survey that gathers information from a random group of people in a scientific way is more accurate than a Web-based survey that accepts answers from anyone who happens to respond. Also, consider the size of the sample—the more people surveyed, the more reliable the results. Surveys from the Federal Government tend to be larger and more scientific, and thus more accurate, than smaller, private surveys.

But surveys are limited by their use of averages. They usually report average earnings or hours, for example, even though people earn or work more or less than the average.



How to find statistics. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is the most comprehensive source of career-related statistics. For earnings and employment information by occupation, industry, and geographic area, check the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics survey, online at www.bls.gov/oes. The National Compensation Survey (www.bls.gov/ncs) offers additional data about earnings by job complexity and responsibility level, but this survey covers fewer geographic areas and occupations.

For information about educational attainment, self-employment, and work hours, see the BLS Current Population Survey, online at www.bls.gov/cps. And for information about on-the-job injuries and fatalities, get data from the BLS Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities program, online at www.bls.gov/iif.

Many other organizations publish career-related statistics. The National Association of Colleges and Employers, for example, gathers data on entry-level salaries of college graduates by major and industry. Professional associations conduct or sponsor surveys of the occupations or industries that they serve, but be sure to check their sample sizes.

Career projections

When choosing a career, many people want to know about its future prospects. Reliable career projections give an objective view of which occupations could offer the most job openings over time. For example, BLS projects more than 200,000 new jobs for accountants and auditors between 2002 and 2012.

But myths abound about job prospects. Rumors of worker shortages, of occupations that are guaranteed to provide jobs, and of imminent job loss in an occupation can mislead people. Some people worry, for example, that all computer programming and telemarketing jobs will be outsourced abroad in the next few years. But in reality, BLS projects that many new jobs in these occupations will be created for U.S. workers in the coming decade. Changes in employment usually are gradual and relatively small.

Don't be fooled. Projections are estimates about the future. But things change, often in unpredictable ways. And, like career statistics, projections are only as good as the methods used to produce them. Pay attention to the

(Continued on page 6)

Career myths that stop people cold

Some career myths are less about occupations than about the working world in general. Myths like these can derail a career search and sap motivation. Here are five common myths, and realities, about careers.

Myth: There is one perfect job for me.

Reality: There are many occupations—and many jobs—that you would enjoy. Focusing on finding a single, perfect career is not only intimidating, it's limiting. If you're like most people, you will have several jobs and careers in your life, and each will have positive and negative aspects to it.

Furthermore, your job preferences are apt to change over time as you gain experience, skill, and self-knowledge. Keeping your options open is a position of strength, not weakness.

Myth: I will use all of my talents and abilities in this job.

Reality: No one job uses all of your talents. And trying to find one that does will derail your job search. Learning a variety of tasks helps you to sharpen abilities that might not be needed in one job but could be invaluable in another. Especially at the start of your career, you should expect to spend time acquiring experience and skills.

This is one reality about careers that, career counselors say, many new graduates fail to grasp. Counselors remind jobseekers to be patient. New workers should expect to start in entry-level positions and be willing to do routine tasks as they gain experience.

Myth: My job has to match my college major or vocational training.

Reality: You need not restrict your job search to careers related to your degree or training. Most jobs do not specify which college major is needed, even if they require that workers have a college degree. Many computer specialist positions, for example, are filled by workers whose degree is in a subject unrelated to computers.

Vocational training is often more closely related to specific occupations. But even this kind of training can open the door to a wider array of jobs than people think. Consider that electrical technicians are now repairing fuel cells, for example, or that veterinary technicians become pharmaceutical sales workers. Often, technical skills are applicable to many settings—and most workers learn the specifics of an occupation on the job.



Myth: No one will hire me because I lack experience, have low grades, have gaps in my work history, etc.

Reality: People overcome all kinds of challenges to find satisfying work. Experts say that how you handle adversity is a good indicator of your ability to persevere. Need experience? Get it! Volunteer, work in a related occupation, or focus on school projects that are relevant to your desired career. Low grades are the problem? Highlight other parts of your resume, and remember that grades usually matter only for that first job after graduation. Gaps in your work history? Overcome them with a well-designed resume that focuses on skills rather than chronology, and then get a little interviewing practice.

For most entry-level jobs, employers are looking for general attributes such as communication skills, interpersonal abilities, and enthusiasm. See “Getting back to work: Returning to the labor force after an absence” in the winter 2004-05 *Quarterly*, online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/winter/art03.pdf, for specific advice about conquering difficulties related to your employability.

Myth: It's too late to change my career.

Reality: It's never too late to change careers. Workers who change careers come from many backgrounds, age groups, and situations. There's the doctor who decided she'd rather be a chef, the retiree who enrolled in college to become an accountant, the construction worker who wanted a steadier income without moving to a warmer climate. For each of these workers, the desire for job satisfaction outweighed the desire for status quo.

To make the change easier, look at your past work and education to see what skills relate to the job you want. Most jobs' entry requirements are more flexible than people think. Gain needed skills with volunteer work, internships, or a class, and don't be afraid to start at the bottom to get the career you want. If you are out of school and want expert advice, consider a local One-Stop Career Center or the counseling center at a nearby school.



(Continued from page 4)

source of projections, as well as to the years and locations for which they were developed.

And remember that future job openings are not the final word when it comes to opportunity: whether there are 50,000 or 500 projected job openings, all you need is one to start your career. The fewer openings there are, the harder it might be to find a job, but there are no guarantees for any jobseeker. Even job openings for nurses, which are projected to be the most numerous, won't simply fall out of the sky. The process of finding, and getting, a job is the same for everyone—regardless of the occupation's projection.

How to find projections. Every 2 years, BLS develops nationally focused employment projections for a 10-year period; you can learn more about the Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections program online at www.bls.gov/emp. (For State occupational projections, see www.projectionscentral.com.) In addition to government-produced projections, many professional organizations produce shorter-term projections based on surveys of their members.

Informational Interviewing

Talking to people about their work is one of the best ways to get accurate information about what a career is like. After all, who would know better about what it takes to do a job well or what a job's benefits and drawbacks are than someone who's already working in it?

Having conversations about work as part of a systematic search for information is called informational interviewing. The goal is to get the facts about an occupation.

And workers usually are eager to correct misconceptions about their occupations. Flight attendants serve

snacks, but they can also describe how they've been trained to deal with emergency situations, and they can tell you what it's really like to deal with unruly passengers or to cope with their unusual work schedules.

Use the informational interview as your chance to challenge any aspect of an occupation that you dislike—or, for that matter, find appealing. Ask about things you've heard, read, or assumed about an occupation or career field. A paramedic, for example, is in the best position to tell you if the job is as exciting as television shows make it seem.

Ask general questions, too, about what a typical day is like, what tasks the job involves, what the worker likes and dislikes about the job, and what skills and personality traits are assets. You might learn, for example, that scientists spend more time than you thought writing reports and grant proposals, that machinists use mathematics every day and that social workers often teach life-skills classes.

Don't be fooled. One person's experience is not universal. Whether a worker talks glowingly or disparagingly about his or her job, another worker in the same occupation almost surely disagrees. Jobs and workers vary. To use informational interviewing well, you will need to speak with more than one person and verify the perspectives with career articles, statistics, and other research.

How to interview for information. The best people to interview are those who already have a job in the occupation that you think you might want to have. Try to find workers, rather than upper-level managers and human resources specialists, to talk to directly. Look for interview subjects by contacting career centers, alumni groups, and professional associations, all of which might have lists of people who are willing to be interviewed. Contacting local employers and people you already know is another option.

To set up your interviews, make telephone calls or write letters, letting the workers know that you are looking for information—not a job. Do some research so that you can ask good questions, but be flexible in your approach.

Learn more about informational interviewing, including how to set up and prepare for an interview, by reading "Informational interviewing: Get the inside scoop on careers" in the summer 2002 *Quarterly* (online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art03.pdf).

Getting experience

Arguably, the best way to get a feel for what a career would be like is to get work experience in it. A physical therapist learns through experience, for example, that pediatric clients require a different temperament and more one-on-one interaction than geriatric clients do. On-the-job experience helps engineers to discover whether the slow progress of laboratory research suits them better than the faster pace of product development.

Of course, it takes awhile to get solid, relevant experience, but internships, volunteer work, and entry-level jobs provide a start. Employers value the skills learned through experience. But another benefit to employers is what experienced workers do *not* bring to the job: unfounded expectations. A worker who has experience in an occupation is less likely to be swayed by career myths that may surround it than someone who has no experience.

Don't be fooled. Your own experiences are the least likely to fool you. Base your career perceptions on these. In an internship or entry-level job, you'll be starting at the bottom—but that's where most workers begin. Even if you don't start in the job you want, view these opportunities as a chance to get an inside track on the career you covet. Observe the people who are in the job you want. Listen. Learn. All experience can work in your favor.

How to get experience. Internships and entry-level jobs are two of the best ways to get hands-on exposure to potential careers. Internships provide short-term experiences and are available primarily to college students and recent graduates. Entry-level jobs are open to jobseekers who meet the qualifications specified by the employer.

Both internships and entry-level jobs often are considered stepping stones to a permanent career. But they need not be. Either one is a good test of what you actually do in a particular occupation—insights, hopes, and myths aside. You might pursue an internship with reservations, only to discover that those reservations were based on myth. Or you might enter a new job expecting to find a career and face a reality convincing you to keep looking.

Getting help

As this article explains, the best way to bust career myths is to get the facts. Information in the *Quarterly* (www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/ooqhome.htm) covers a variety

of career topics. One article related to the topic of career myths, "As seen on TV: Reality vs. fantasy in occupational portrayals on the small screen," online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2003/fall/art01.pdf, explores how occupations are often different from how they are depicted on television. Another *Quarterly* article, "Matching yourself with the world of work: 2004," online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/fall/art01.pdf, helps you to match your skills and interests with careers that might interest you.

For more information, for personal assistance, or to find a career counselor, visit a One-Stop Career Center. You can find a local One-Stop center and other services for which you might be eligible by calling toll-free, 1 (877) 348-0502 or TTY toll-free, 1 (877) 348-0501, or visiting online at www.servicelocator.org.

America's Career InfoNet, online at www.acinet.org, lists free online assessment tests to help jobseekers identify occupations that match their skills and interests. The O*NET (Occupational Information Network) skills search, like the InfoNet's skills profiler, matches your interests to hundreds of occupations. Try it online at <http://onetcenter.org/skills>. O*NET provides detailed information about the skills required in hundreds of occupations via <http://online.onetcenter.org>. ∞

