

I wish I knew what I want to be when I grow up

"I wish I knew what I want to be when I grow up," my 43-year old colleague said over lunch. She has worked in several fields and was now thinking of leaving her position to go on a quest for her dream job.

If I could answer that question for every person who has ever asked me, I could buy that condo in Hawaii. Unfortunately, the journey is the answer, not the destination. The quest is different for each of us but has some signposts in common. Once you have determined what these signs mean to you, your path will be clear.

The signposts you are looking for are Motivation, Skills and Field of Interest.

Plan your career journey like you would plan a vacation. For example, people don't typically get in a car and drive off in search of a vacation. They spend some time fantasizing about a destination before they go. They might do some research to determine if the destination suits their interests. After several vacations they discover their preferred way to spend free time. The same is true for your career. Most people fantasize about different jobs, try a few out and then settle on one preferred path.

Your interests give you clues.

The organizations you join and the recreational and social events you choose may give you insights into your interests and abilities. What you do in your free time tends to play to your strengths and is a clear measure of what interests you. Don't ignore it. For example, a friend of mine was a manager in a corporation but spent her most satisfying moments volunteering in the non-profit world. Eventually she realized that she needed to do work that she found more meaningful in order to satisfy her inner motivations.

Look back at your childhood.

Go back in time for clues about how you are "hardwired." For example, from the time I was little I played "school" with the kids in my neighborhood. I have always had some element of teaching in every job I've ever had. As a kid, I was always selling something—from handmade potholders to candy bars door-to-door, for all my school activities. I shouldn't have been surprised years later when I abandoned my corporate career to start my own consulting and training business.

What careers have you fantasized about?

Knowing yourself requires some conscious self-observation about your choices and desires. To begin your journey, think about careers you have fantasized about. What exactly is it that attracts you to, say, being an actress? If it's the recognition, perhaps you could get it from performing (Motivation) in some other way. So, you'd like to be an activity director on a cruise ship? If you love organizing things (Skills), why not explore marketing or public relations, where organizing special events is a big part of the job. If it's the travel that pulls you, explore jobs (Field of Interest) in travel or find a job that allows you plenty of time off or requires travel.

Ask others what they think.

When you are discovering your strengths, start by asking former bosses, friends and family members what they think you'd be good at. Often, they see your skills better

than you do. But don't stop there. Ask them why they feel that way. Find out what skills and abilities they see in you. Don't laugh. Listen.

Identify several fields and experiment.

Most people start out in one field and end up in a different one. Experiment with fields that interest you. Perhaps you've always thought you'd like to work in the computer field but you are currently working as an administrative assistant. Why not apply for an administrative job in the IT department? Get up close to see if it still appeals to you.

No one knows where they will end up when they start out. Relax a little and don't try to force it. Once you're on the open road, you'll want to make a few extra stops when you spot something interesting. The career journey is the fun of it.

Dr. Joan Lloyd, speaker and speaking coach, trainer & management consultant for companies of all sizes, from start-ups to the Fortune 500, as well as trade & professional associations across the country.

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