

A Road Map for Successful Career Exploration

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Most graduate students and postdocs know they should give serious thought to their next career steps, but they aren't sure how to navigate the career exploration process. After all, for those with doctoral training, there are a dizzying array of possible career "destinations" both inside and outside academe. Collecting information about even a few of those options can quickly become overwhelming and hard to sustain along with your current job.

What's more, career exploration is a bit of an emotional roller coaster -- an ever-changing blend of exhilaration, disappointment, anxiety and hope. If any of these challenges sound familiar, take heart! In this column we share a tool we developed to help people keep moving steadily forward despite these challenges.

The tool, called the [Career Exploration Road Map](#), is designed to help you: 1) visualize the "terrain," or process, of career exploration, 2) track your progress and 3) identify the most strategic next steps. It is meant to be pinned to your wall and revisited every few months. Some trainees have found the road map helpful when they start exploring careers, for the conceptual orientation it provides to an often unfamiliar process. Others have found it especially useful when they've gotten bogged down, as a means of getting unstuck and starting to move forward again.

We developed the Career Exploration Road Map for University of California, San Francisco, graduate students and postdocs participating in our [Motivating INformed Decisions](#) program (or MIND, funded by an [NIH Broadening Experiences in Scientific Training](#) award). The road map, like the entire MIND program, is career neutral; many of our trainees are actively considering *both* [a more traditional faculty career as well as a different career possibility](#). If you are exploring more than one career simultaneously, the road map can help you track, juggle and reprioritize your efforts dynamically to make best use of your time.

The road map guides you through six different stages of career exploration. (Please click on the [Career Exploration Road Map graphic](#) to follow along while you read.) As professor of organizational behavior at the London Business School, [Herminia Ibarra](#), notes in [Working Identity](#), her insightful book about career reinvention, career exploration is a highly iterative process. This iteration is represented by the cyclical path of the map. The self-assessment stage (green) is followed by investigation (yellow), reflection (orange) and synthesis (red), culminating either in planning and implementing a job search (purple) or in reassessment (blue) and renewed investigation (back to yellow).

Within each of these stages, the map poses a number of questions, which may be considered in any order. In the green self-assessment stage, for example, you are prompted with questions like “What am I good at?” “What am I interested in?” and “What’s important to me? What do I care about?” Those questions can be answered intuitively, or you may find it helpful to take formal assessments such as [myIDP](#) (natural sciences) or [ImaginePhd](#) (humanities and social sciences).

After an initial period of self-assessment, you begin to investigate possible careers (yellow). We advise three methods of investigation; 1) gathering information on a career (for example, by reading), 2) interacting with professionals in that career (as described [here](#) and [here](#)), and 3) finding a way to try typical tasks (for example, via a brief [job simulation](#), a consulting project or an [internship](#)).

After a period of investigation come two of the most crucial (and overlooked) stages of career exploration:

1. Reflection (orange) involves evaluating the compatibility between what you know about yourself and what you’ve learned about a given career.
2. Synthesis (red) entails stepping back and re-evaluating your interest level in each career that you have been exploring, in order to decide: Should you invest more effort exploring and preparing for this career? Or is it time to cross it off your list?

Reflection and synthesis may sound logical, but many people we’ve counseled find them hard to do. We created the road map to unpack those two vital stages into a number of simply worded subquestions.

We highlight several important features of each stage below, starting with a few notes on the reflection questions:

- Although we encourage people to strive for a job that's a good fit for their skills, interests and personalities, we also caution them that no job is perfect. Thus, in addition to asking, "Would this career let me do work I find interesting and exciting?" the reflection stage also asks, "Would this career involve a tolerable amount of work that does *not* interest me?"
- Drawing from Ibarra's notion that one's professional identity is powerfully shaped by the people you work with, one of our synthesis questions asks you to consider the fit with your potential colleagues. ("Do I like the people I'd interact with in this field? Do I want to be like them?")
- An essential part of reflection, and the one that has proven most challenging for our program participants, is considering whether the career under consideration aligns with one's core values ("Does it suit what's important to me?") Because each person has a different collection of core values, visiting this square of the map will elicit different reflective questions for each person. For example, if you value financial stability or living in a certain location, you might ask yourself, "How good are my employment prospects in this field or place?" But other questions will be more important if your most cherished values are teamwork, a flexible schedule or intellectual challenge.
- While it sounds sensible to carefully consider the compatibility of a career with your values, don't feel defeated if it is hard for you to define exactly what your values are; it takes time to unearth even deeply held preferences and priorities. The fact that you may need to distinguish between your own values and those you perceive in your mentors, family or friends compounds this challenge. For those and other reasons, some of our program participants have tended to subjugate their values to their more easily articulated skills and interests. Yet we have observed that when people gain clarity and confidence in their values, they are better equipped to describe what they want in a compelling way, and their career exploration gains momentum and purpose.
- Finally, you are asked, "What do I need to do to make myself marketable, and am I willing to do it?" For example, am I willing to get an M.B.A. or J.D. degree or complete an expensive certificate program? For international scholars, considering marketability sparks more questions: What country would I prefer to live in, for example, and what do I need to do to achieve marketability there? If I want to remain in the United States, then what are my chances of getting a particular visa or a green card, and what career paths are most promising in this regard?
- Note: If any of the reflection questions proves difficult to answer, don't despair. You've probably identified a gap you can fill by returning to investigation mode. For that reason, it is common for people to cycle back and forth between reflection and investigation modes.

The subsequent synthesis section consists of two key questions, which together help you decide whether or not to continue exploring that career.

- First, "Have my answers to the reflection questions been confirmed by multiple knowledgeable sources?" To be clear: we are *not* advocating that you write a scholarly treatise on a career for which you've lost enthusiasm. But please don't give up on a

career that excited you based on something you read or that an acquaintance said.

Instead, if you learn something troubling about a career of interest, return to investigation mode and ask several established professionals in the field *if* it is accurate.

- Second, you are asked, “Looking back at the reflection questions that matter most to me, have I answered yes or no?” Based on your response -- whether yes, no or a mixture of yeses and noes -- the road map takes you in one of three different directions.

If you answer most reflection questions in the affirmative, then the game sends you to the purple “plan and implement” branch of the road map, which culminates in getting a job that’s a great next step for you. Hurrah!

If, however, you mostly answered no, then it is probably time to stop pursuing that career.

Letting go of a career that you have fantasized about or invested a lot of time in can be disheartening, and as a result, people sometimes lose momentum here. But ruling out a career is progress, even if it doesn’t always feel that way. To help you identify the specific progress you have made, the road map directs you to the reassess loop (blue), which asks questions like, “What’s one way I have strengthened my career exploration skills while exploring this career?” For example, perhaps you requested an informational interview from a total stranger for the first time or practiced giving a 30-second spiel about your interests. That skill will make your next round of career exploration easier.

The reassessment loop also asks, “What’s one thing I’ve learned about my preferences or priorities while investigating this career?” While ruling a career out, you often discover something about yourself; such a discovery may then inform the choice of which career to explore next.

For example, one of our students let go of the possibility of pursuing patent law because, although his interest in technical writing remained strong, he realized he was more motivated to translate technical material for patients rather than patent officers. That reaction revealed that -- for him-- the value of helping others took precedence over working on the frontiers of knowledge. By noticing his own reactions to the career that he was investigating, he became aware of an aspect of his interests he’d not realized before. That discovery helped him target his efforts and networking during his next round of investigation (yellow), which he focused on medical writing.

If you answered the reflection questions with a mix of noes and yeses, the road map directs you to an important question: “Can I find a niche in this career that would be a good fit, given my concern about ...?” For example, one of our trainees heard that management consultants travel a lot and was concerned that so much travel would be incompatible with starting a family. By asking her contacts, “Is there any type of management consultant who *doesn’t* travel a ton?” she learned that, although consultants at the high-profile firms often travel extensively, smaller boutique firms serve a mostly local clientele. She then focused on networking with

people in the boutique firms and let them know she was interested if a job ever opened up. Six months later, one of them wrote to say their company was opening a position to help with a new local client, and was she interested?

Although career exploration is time-consuming and iterative, it need not be disheartening. The Career Exploration Road Map demonstrates that every step, including the branch points, is a step forward.