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7 Ways to Lay the Groundwork for Your Next Job (Even if You Don't Know What it Is)

by

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Whether you love your job or not, you've probably given at least some thought to your next career move. (And if you haven't, well, [here are a few good reasons](#) why you should.)

Problem is, a lot of us stop there. After all, if you don't have a set goal—if you don't know exactly what lies in your professional future—there's not much you can do to prepare for your next step, right?

Wrong. In fact, even if your goals are a little fuzzy, there's plenty you can do to position yourself for (and even stumble upon!) future opportunities, whatever they may be. Here are a few ideas.

1. Get Out There

Ask many people how they got their current jobs, and you'll often hear that it's a case of being in the right place at the right time—or of knowing the right people.

Either way, a great way to start preparing yourself for the future is by getting yourself out of your comfort zone and meeting new people. Whether it's through conscious networking efforts or simply volunteering and heading to industry events, expanding your network is an important step in preparing for the next phase of your career. You'll learn about other people's career paths (which might give you some insight into what you want to do next)—and maybe even stumble upon an opportunity or two for yourself.

2. Stay in Touch

Of course, once you meet all those nice people, you'll need to keep in touch with them. And let's not forget all the [people who are already in your network](#)! You don't want to be that person who hasn't been in touch for five years, but who suddenly reaches out when you need an “in” somewhere.

So, no matter where you are in your career exploration process or job hunt, make sure you're reaching out to the important people in your network at least a couple times a year (read: before you need them). You'll be much more successful getting people to help you if you're good about reaching out periodically to check in (or, better yet, to help out with something).

3. Build Expertise

While you might not know exactly what you want to do, you probably have an inkling of the areas in your current job that you wouldn't mind doing more of in the future. Well, now is the perfect opportunity to be building that expertise, whether that's through structured training and certification programs (hint: check out your company's budget for employee professional development) or more self-driven experiences like writing a blog or taking an online class. Even if you don't eventually use this expertise, hiring managers frequently prefer someone who specializes in a particular area—the assumption being a specialist can do everything a generalist can do plus some.

4. Learn Something New

Interested in something completely unrelated to your current position? That's great, too! Even if you don't have a secret side skill you want to develop (or even if you never use it again in the future), learning something new will help you stay nimble and engaged. You don't want to eventually be that difficult-to-train new hire who hasn't had to learn anything from scratch in years!

So, pick up an instrument, learn a new language, or try coding. At the very least, you'll be stretching your brain—and your new skill might just end up playing a larger role in your career than you can imagine.

5. Push for Results

Whether your current position is related to what you'll eventually do next or not, one thing you definitely want to walk away with is a whole stash of [good stories for interviews](#)—stories that show you're a top performer, that you go above and beyond your job description, and that you get things done.

So, start making notes of those stories and, better yet, working on some new ones. This might mean pushing for more projects or taking the initiative to do things that aren't necessarily "your job." Whatever you do, make sure that when you leave you can clearly articulate your impact on a variety of projects. Nothing bores an interviewer faster than listing out your job responsibilities, so do your future self a favor and start lining up some big achievements.

6. Figure Out Your Values

Regardless of what's going on in your professional life, you can benefit from [figuring out what your career values are](#). Knowing, for example, that you care about recognition, but don't really care about commute time, is a huge leap forward in figuring out what kind of position will make you happy in the future—without even touching what industry or role interests you. Start keeping notes on what makes you happy in your job and what makes you pull your hair out. It's the easiest way to figure out what you value.

7. Say Yes

And finally, start saying yes to little opportunities that come your way even if you'd really rather not. That local charity that you'd support if you had time? You're going to its next fundraiser. That invitation to be a panelist at your alma mater on a career exploration panel for freshmen? You're there. You might not immediately see how these little activities relate to your future career, but you never know what opportunities will connect you to your next job. Create your own luck by saying yes to those interesting things that come your way. New experiences will help you figure out what you like, and new people will get you there. What is there to lose?

So, what were you saying? You don't know what your next career move is? Turns out, that doesn't matter. There are a million things that you could be doing to learn more, narrow down your options, and meet people. Time to get out there, figure stuff out, and start saying yes.

Photo of [bricks courtesy of Shutterstock](#).

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