

Dream Big. Hustle Hard.

Chapter 1

Starting out: What to do when you don't know what to do

- To know what you want to do for work, you need to understand what kinds of activities you find motivating.
- You can use a process of elimination to determine what you don't enjoy and be open to exploring what you might enjoy.
- Most career paths aren't a perfect straight-line people reach a happy place through trial and error - this is a good thing.
- We learn best from experience because experiences give us data points to make better informed decisions. You need data about yourself to make decisions about what kind of job you want to do.

How did I go from worrying that I would fail my degree to being headhunted by top tech companies like Amazon? Let's just say through a lot of hard work and trial and error, because I didn't have a master plan for my career. When I arrived at university, a bright-eyed fresher at the London School of Economics (LSE) in October 2006, I was overwhelmed by the abundance of fiercely intelligent people. I was studying a degree my parents were more passionate about than me, and really felt like an imposter. Don't get me wrong, I was excited to start my university studies, but being truly independent for the first time in my life was overwhelming. Like many obedient children of strict immigrant parents, I had spent so much of life being

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told what to do and obeying those commands, that being on my own for the first time left my mind free to wander and question things like my true motivations in education. It was a line of questioning that often made me feel confused about who I was and what I wanted out of life. I knew I wanted to be successful but I wasn't sure what that meant because my own opinions were so heavily influenced by my parents' ideas of success. Success for them was a job that brought you security, wealth and status. But would those three things alone make me feel fulfilled? I had my doubts.

My career and life, like everybody on this earth, has had its fair share of ups and downs since my fresher year. The adventurous road I've been on, combined with the extraordinary people I've met along the way, have made me realise there's no clearly defined path to success. And that's a good thing. It means anyone can draw their own path from where they are now to where they want to be in the future. Success is subjective. It's up to you as an individual to create your own standard of success to hold yourself accountable to. If you are willing to work hard for it and put yourself through some tough challenges, you can get there. You may not be the best in your field, but you'll be doing what you're passionate about. What's so great about status, anyway?

For me, making positive progress towards my career goals required a change in my limiting mindset, from thinking in binary, black and white terms - like right or wrong, succeed or fail, win or lose - to appreciating that the world is too complex to be simplified in this way. Success and failure are more like two ends of a spectrum than two sides of a coin. As I began to understand that these dichotomies I'd based my life decisions on were actually false, I began to be kinder to myself as I navigated through university life. I guess right and wrong could be a spectrum too? Or totally relative and subject to the specific situation, person, time or place. Perhaps it was time to revisit my life plan. I arrived at university assuming I'd get a good degree and land myself a

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job as a lawyer or economist at a reputable international organisation. In the checklist of my life, which my dad had drafted shortly after my birth with zero input from me, the post-university career step was already sketched out. Except, now that I was at university, that next step wasn't exciting anymore. Now I found myself at LSE, it was as if the curtain had lifted and I realised there were thousands more career opportunities available to me. I was overwhelmed by the choices and feeling pressured by the responsibility of having to choose The Right One. My old way of thinking, the framework I used to make decisions, just didn't seem to work anymore. It seemed limiting and one-dimensional. How could I start to undo a lifetime of limiting behaviour and allow myself the freedom to make bolder choices?

I grew up in a strict patriarchal household where my parents, my Nigerian dad particularly, put a lot of pressure on me to always get the top grades. For him, the world of education was very black and white - the main purpose of education was to secure top grades in order to land a spot at a renowned university and then a well-paid job at a reputable institution. Because of my dad's obsession with education and good grades, from a young age I began to obsess about achievement and perfection. I knew that to succeed at school, I had to listen to my teachers, work hard and get the highest grades. Surely I could just do this forever - obey the commands of my superiors - and things would work out, right? I did not anticipate that life after school would be full of so many decisions and that professors would not really give you life advice in the same way teachers did.

My narrow view of achievement didn't help me when I got to LSE. I assumed that I could just carry on as I had done throughout all my life, follow the syllabus to a tee, work hard, listen to my teachers and things would eventually fall into place around me - the right job, the right career. Except the careers world isn't like school. There's no clear step-by-

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step process. Unless you're studying a vocational degree that leads to a specific profession, there is no obvious next step post graduation. I studied Economics and Government and like many geeky social scientists, studying the theories seemed more thrilling than applying them to real life. Where was the Idiot's Guide to Building a Successful Career that I so desperately needed? It was clear to me that in the job market, there are no rules and regulations decreeing what should be on a syllabus or at what age one should be ready to graduate. It's not a consistent ecosystem set up to support and guide you, like schools. The career world is a dynamic ecosystem that's constantly changing, a world where your time and labour become resources that corporations want. In the careers world you are not only a person - you are a commodity. A necessary ingredient for a company to operate. This means you are investing your life, your youth, your abilities and your ideas into making a company successful.

There has been more transparency about the career world in recent years, thanks to social media and countless online resources, workers have become more clued-up about the opportunity cost of working in an office and so corporations have started investing more in the employee experience - personal development, skills training, and perks. But that doesn't change the fact that you give your best energy and ideas to the organisation you work with. You spend more time doing your job than hanging out with your friends, your family and pursuing your hobbies. And since that's the case - shouldn't you pick wisely? Another shift that has occurred for kids of the 90s and beyond - for better or for worse - is the link between our careers and identity. I feel that more so than my parents, my job is a reflection of me. It is a core part of my identity. I can't clock in, clock out, and stop thinking about work once I leave. What I do is a reflection of who I am, it's not something I can hide from my friends or others who I care about. It's something I want to be proud of, something I can get excited talking about. No pressure then!

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So how do we decide what to do after graduation? Most of us have little or no real life work experience by the time we get to university. That's why it's helpful to use university opportunities to better understand our likes and dislikes. Through participation in sports teams and student societies, we have a chance to immerse ourselves in new experiences. Gaining new responsibilities allows us to flex our skills and learn about ourselves - is this role exciting? Challenging? Frustrating? While you're studying, you can take up a leadership position as a committee member, or even run for an elected position governing your student body. As you approach these challenges think about what skills you need to succeed. These are the skills you will be developing in the role. For example, if you decide to be Treasurer for your university's Women in Business society - you will need to have strong numerical skills and be able to balance a budget. If you take up a position as a reporter for your student newspaper, you will need strong communication skills and storytelling abilities. If you join the debating team, you will develop your public speaking skills. What skills and abilities do you enjoy using? Which ones do you have a natural flair for? Take notes, as these skills will help you decide what jobs to apply for, what jobs you might enjoy.

Through creating new experiences you begin to gather empirical data about yourself. And as any good student knows, data enables us to make well-informed decisions. This is why people read dozens of online reviews before deciding which new laptop to buy, or which hotel to book for their vacation. But most schooling doesn't give us the opportunity to gather career-related data about ourselves. It's why so many of us struggle to decide what to do after university. We also feel pressured into making the right choice - it feels as though the remainder of our lives, whether it be happy or sad, a failure or success, hinges on making the right choice. I used to think that, and now I know that's not true.

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By the time I got to final year, I still wasn't sure what my career would be. I felt lost - there were a number of possibilities. But which one was right? Which one would make me most successful? Rich? Happy? Like most confused soon-to-be-graduates I turned to my parents again. My dad wanted me to be an economist but at LSE my confidence in my quantitative skills had been completely destroyed. I would spend hours on problem sets that more skilled mathematicians in my class could solve in minutes. Was I really considering a career where I would always feel like 'the dumb one'? The truth was that econometrics, a necessary skill, was a turn-off. I didn't fancy the idea of spending my life in a career where I was always playing catch up to peers who were passionate about number-crunching. I wanted to hone in on my natural abilities and maximise them to their potential. There were so many things other than maths that I really enjoyed and excelled in.

My stepmom wanted me to be a lawyer. And to be fair I did love watching law dramas on TV, not that they are a true reflection of the profession, but your interest has to be piqued somehow. She used to say, "You're so good at arguing and debating, you'd be great as a lawyer and you'd earn so much money". She always made a convincing case for it, and I thought it would be irrational to rule it out without some actual real life experience. A part of me suspected I'd find it too stuffy and boring but wanted to show my parents I was taking their advice seriously and exploring the opportunity.

So I found myself applying for an advocacy competition with a prestigious firm in the City in the summer of my second year. The winners would receive cash prizes as well as an interview for a place on their internship scheme. I figured, 'let's see if the law is for me', even though a part of me really couldn't picture myself wearing black suits all day poring over briefs and being bossed around by stiff-lipped partners. With the help of a friend who was studying a law degree, I researched and rehearsed my application speech,

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recorded a clip on my mobile phone and sent it off with a short blurb about me and why I wanted to join the law. Weeks later I found out I was a finalist and was invited into the offices of the firm to have advocacy training with two of the partners.

Looking back I realise how incredible it was to get that experience - particularly given that partners at firms like these charge well over £600 an hour to clients - and I was getting an hour with them for free! I arrived at their offices and was wowed by the opulence of the decor; glass fronted foyer, imposing reception desks, SO much free empty space, impressive art and what I found to be the ultimate touch, mahogany walls and marble floors. The intended impression was certainly achieved.

I was ushered up to the conference room and felt that all my assumptions about these high-flying city firms were pretty much spot on. As I walked through the corridors I saw a homogenous flock of suited and booted, mostly white, men. An occasional woman or Asian person floated past. I had not spotted a black or brown face yet. I felt like I really couldn't picture myself working in this kind of environment. I was still grateful for the opportunity, though. Suddenly I found myself face-to-face with the partners. What followed was a really candid and helpful lesson in how to deliver a winning argument. It was interesting to me that many of the vocal tactics they advised as their favourites had been taught to me in drama lessons at school. I guess in many ways the skills used to create emotion in a crowd are the same regardless of the crowd you address: an audience, a jury, voters. Following the lesson, it was up to me to put the advice into practice and prepare for the final round of the competition. All selected finalists would be making an argument about why there should be diversity in the law to a panel of experts including Shami Chakrabati, who was the Director of human rights organization Liberty at the time.

I ended up winning joint second place in the competition

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which meant I received the highly coveted 'vac scheme' interview. It turned out to be a really eye-opening experience for me, because I realised what law firms were really looking for in graduates, and it was not me. At the interview, one of the interviewers pointed out that I had been editor of my students' newspaper. "Is writing a hobby?" he inquired. I responded enthusiastically, "Yes, it is. I really enjoy doing it. It develops my creative side". His next question threw me off a bit. "And would you continue this hobby if you were successful in gaining a place at the firm?" What an odd question, I thought. I said I would try to keep it up in my spare time but certainly not let it get in the way of fulfilling my expectations at work. I guess that wasn't the star answer as, a few days later, I got the call from HR - I wouldn't be offered a place. The feedback I was given was that I wasn't as 'focused' as other candidates. It was a fair assessment. My heart wasn't in it. The short time I had spent gracing the hallways for their offices made me realise I didn't want to work there. My interview only confirmed that it felt like they were more interested in hiring a diligent automaton with no life outside work. That certainly wasn't me. And that's OK.

Going through this made me realise that getting experience, no matter how brief, is the most effective way to understand what you want out of work. Few people know precisely what they want to do with their lives. Most of us find out by process of elimination - we know that we don't want to do silver service or barista work after a few unpleasant stints during summer holidays. I strongly recommend doing part-time work during university. Not only will it supplement your spending money, it's also a great way to step out of the bubble university creates. You have a chance to meet people other than fellow students on campus, often from different backgrounds, and also find out more about yourself. Specifically, what you're good at and what kind of work environments are interesting to you.

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Working as a sales associate in Selfridges during university made me realise that I had a knack for sales. My impression of sales was quite basic before I started the job. I had images in my mind of media stereotypes - a door to door salesman from the 1950s, cold calling sales operators in dingy boiler rooms, or under-appreciated perfume ladies on shop floors. Little did I realise how valuable a sales team is to a business, and how many different types of sales roles there are. Most importantly, I soon realised sales was more than just about making a sale; it was really about connecting with people, something I had a natural flair for. Suddenly I was leveraging the skills that came naturally to me - talking to people, being inquisitive and friendly, finding out about them - and using the details I learned to my advantage, to better serve the customer needs. All this for a decent wage. Through my job I not only learned about my working abilities but also my preferred working conditions. I began to understand the merits of a desk-based job after getting sore feet from standing on the shop floor all day. Through working with a real mix of people - some extrovert, some introvert, some intellectual, some completely fashion obsessed - I began to understand more about the types of co-workers I felt most positive around and therefore the kind of company cultures I would gravitate towards. Think about what jobs are within your reach, and how they can help you understand yourself in the workplace better.

When I told my friends that my ordeal of interviewing for a vac scheme left me feeling like a lawyer's life was not for me, they said I was silly for giving up on the law so quickly "Do you know how much money you can earn once you're qualified? Imagine being on six figures before you're 30." they said. But I had to trust my gut and what felt right to me. I knew in my heart it wasn't my calling because I felt it instinctively that I was not motivated by money or by prestige and I wanted to do something where I could be more creative. I only applied for the competition because of pressure from my parents. My heart wasn't in it. Being rich wasn't an accomplishment that was calling out to me. I had

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no interest in doing things like wearing designer clothes and dining at Nobu every week just because I could afford it. I also knew that with that pay cheque came a bigger sacrifice - my time. The corporate lawyers that I knew, LSE graduates a few years above me, worked until the early hours of the morning. They rarely did social stuff mid-week like going to exercise classes, meeting with friends or going on dates. They had no work-life balance. It wasn't for me. Spending quality time with those close to me has always made me happy and I wanted that to be a big feature in my life. I didn't want a job where there would always be an expectation that work / the client came first.

We spend most of our waking lives at work - are we really just chasing a label? "Rich" "Successful" "Accomplished"? Are we pursuing a parent's vision of our lives, a vision we may not fully subscribe to? What about our own personal fulfilment? I think as individuals we need to approach the job hunt more rationally. To be successful in any role you need to be motivated by the work, and to be motivated by the work you need to understand what the work involves and what is required of you to do it. This level of understanding requires real-life experience and interactions with people already in the role.

Activity:

- Make a list of all the jobs you've had since you were in your early teens (it doesn't have to be an official salaried job, it could be a volunteering position, work experience or a summer camp)
- For each position you've held, list the aspects you liked most (e.g. inputting data into Excel), and which you liked least (e.g. interacting with customers)
- Using this list, what themes can you develop about the types of things you enjoy at work and the types

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of things you don't enjoy at work?

- Think of the skills you used in these roles e.g. organisational skills, communication skills.

Framework:

Use the data you've collected to make a list of your personal career priorities, the three top things you want out of a job e.g. lots of money, new skills training, international travel. Now as you approach the job hunt, make a list of all the roles that interest you. I like to use a Google Sheet / Excel to build a table that has all the key information I need as a column heading: Company, Job Title, Job Link, Application Due Date, etc. Use your priorities to create a ranking system that helps you sort out all the job opportunities in order of preference. It might be that your priorities change over time or as you start investigating different roles. That's to be expected. But stay focused on three key things which really matter to you. This will help you pick which roles amongst the thousands available out there would be most fulfilling to you right now.

tl;dr

- Use work experience and part-time jobs to better understand yourself in the workplace and form ideas of what could be a rewarding graduate job.
- The job market is ever-changing, dynamic, and your time is a valuable resource to employers so choose a role wisely, taking into account your career priorities.
- Create your own standard of success if you really want to find fulfilling work. Your parents' advice is framed by their own experiences of life and therefore may not be relevant for your life.