

CAREER PIVOT

A practical guide for career changers



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Finding Your Next Career: A Practical Guide for the Undecided Pivot

Introduction: When you know you need change but don't know where to go

You're not happy in your current role. You know you need a change. But when someone asks "What do you want to do next?" you draw a blank. Sound familiar?

This uncertainty is more common than you might think. Many professionals reach a point where they recognise their current path isn't working, but they haven't yet identified what would work better. The good news? Not knowing your destination doesn't mean you can't start the journey.

This guide will help you explore possibilities, identify transferable skills, and take practical steps toward a career that feels right, even when you're starting without a clear target in mind.

Why career clarity is so difficult

Let's acknowledge why this feels so hard:

- **You've invested time in your current path** and feel pressure to make that investment "worth it"
- **Society expects you to have a clear plan**, creating anxiety about admitting uncertainty
- **The options feel overwhelming** when you consider the sheer number of career possibilities
- **You're comparing your reality to others' highlight reels** on LinkedIn, making your uncertainty feel like failure
- **Fear of making the "wrong" choice** can paralyse decision-making

Understanding these pressures is the first step to working past them. Career pivots aren't linear, and uncertainty is a natural part of genuine change.

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Step 1: Understand what you're moving away from

Before you can identify where to go, you need clarity on what you're leaving behind, and why.

Complete this exercise:

Divide a page into two columns: "What's Not Working" and "Why It Matters"

Example:

What's Not Working	Why It Matters
Long commute	I'm missing time with my children
Repetitive tasks	I need intellectual stimulation to feel engaged
Corporate politics	I value transparency and direct communication

Dig deeper with these questions:

- What drains your energy in your current role?
- When do you feel most frustrated or unfulfilled?
- What aspects make you dread Monday mornings?
- Which work situations leave you feeling resentful?
- What would need to change for you to stay?

Pro tip: Be specific. "I don't like my job" is vague. "I spend 80% of my time in meetings that could be emails" identifies a concrete problem you can address in your next role.

Step 2: Identify your hidden strengths

You've developed more valuable skills than you probably realise. Let's surface them.

The retrospective achievement audit:

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Write down 5-7 moments when you felt genuinely proud of your work. For each, identify:

- What specific skills you used
- What made this satisfying
- What conditions enabled your success
- What role you naturally took (organiser, problem-solver, supporter, innovator, etc.)

Example:

Achievement: Organised the company charity fundraiser that exceeded target by 40%

Skills: Project management, stakeholder coordination, creative problem-solving, budget management

What made it satisfying: Seeing tangible impact, bringing people together, creative freedom

Conditions: Given autonomy, had a clear goal, working with enthusiastic people

Natural role: Organiser and motivator

Ask trusted colleagues:

Reach out to 3-5 people you've worked with and ask: "What do you think I'm particularly good at?"

Their external perspective often reveals strengths you take for granted.

Step 3: Explore possibilities without commitment

You don't need to choose your next career immediately. Start by gathering information.

Low-commitment exploration activities:

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Informational interviews: Reach out to people in roles or industries that spark your curiosity. A simple message:

"Hi [Name], I'm exploring different career paths and your work in [field] looks fascinating. Would you be willing to chat for 20 minutes about your experience? I'm particularly interested in understanding [specific aspect]."

Job shadowing: Ask if you can observe someone at work for a few hours or a day. Many professionals are flattered by the interest.

Volunteer or side projects: Test potential interests without career commitment. Want to explore education? Volunteer as a mentor. Curious about marketing? Help a local charity with their social media.

Online courses: Platforms like FutureLearn, OpenLearn, or Coursera offer short introductory courses. Completion isn't the goal, discovering whether something sparks your interest is.

Industry events and webinars: Attend conferences, talks, or online events in fields that intrigue you. The casual networking provides insider perspectives.

Pro tip: Aim for breadth before depth. Speak to people across different industries before committing significant time to studying one specific area.

Step 4: Test your assumptions

We often rule out possibilities based on assumptions we've never tested.

Common limiting beliefs to challenge:

"I'm too old to change careers" **Reality check:** Many successful career changers pivot in their 40s, 50s, and beyond. Experience is an asset, not a liability.

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"I can't afford to start at the bottom" **Reality check:** Career changes don't always mean starting over. Your transferable skills often qualify you for mid-level positions in new fields.

"I need another degree to change fields" **Reality check:** While some professions require specific qualifications, many value practical experience and demonstrable skills over formal education.

"I'll hate being a beginner again" **Reality check:** Being a beginner in something you're passionate about often feels better than being experienced in something unfulfilling.

The reality testing process:

For each concern holding you back, actively seek evidence:

- Find three people who've done what you think is impossible
- Research actual requirements vs. preferred qualifications
- Calculate whether your financial concerns are accurate or assumed
- Identify which fears are based on facts and which on speculation

Step 5: Use the process of elimination

If you can't identify what you want, start by eliminating what you definitely don't.

Create your "absolutely not" list:

What are the non-negotiables you're ruling out? This narrows possibilities without forcing premature commitment.

Examples:

- No jobs requiring 60+ hour weeks
- Nothing that requires relocation
- No roles without clear progression opportunities
- Nothing that conflicts with my values around [specific issue]
- No positions without flexibility for family commitments

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Then create your "maybe" list:

These are fields or roles you're genuinely curious about, even if you're not sure they're right:

- Roles where you could use your [specific skill]
- Industries that align with your interest in [topic]
- Positions that would allow you to [specific aspiration]

Pro tip: Your "absolutely not" list is often more revealing than trying to identify what you want. It clarifies your values and priorities.

Step 6: Conduct small experiments

Rather than making a dramatic leap, test possibilities through low-risk experiments.

The career experiment framework:

Choose a hypothesis: "I might enjoy working in [specific field/role]"

Design a small test:

- Timeframe: 2-4 weeks
- Commitment: 2-5 hours per week
- Method: [specific activity that provides insight]

Examples of experiments:

Hypothesis: I might enjoy content writing

Experiment: Start a blog or write three guest posts for existing platforms. Aim for one post per week for a month.

What I'll learn: Whether I enjoy the creative process, can handle deadlines, and find satisfaction in this work.

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Hypothesis: Project management in the charity sector might suit me

Experiment: Volunteer to coordinate a fundraising event for a local charity over the next two months.

What I'll learn: Whether I enjoy the combination of organisation, stakeholder management, and mission-driven work.

After each experiment, evaluate:

- Did this energise or drain me?
- Could I see myself doing this regularly?
- What surprised me about this experience?
- What questions does this raise?

Step 7: Identify your career values

Understanding what matters to you helps filter possibilities.

Rank these career values from most to least important:

- Financial security and earning potential
- Work-life balance and flexibility
- Intellectual challenge and learning
- Helping others or social impact
- Creative expression
- Status and recognition
- Autonomy and independence
- Team collaboration
- Clear progression path
- Job security and stability
- Variety and novelty
- Working with your hands
- Remote work options
- Leadership opportunities

Your top 3-5 values become your filter:

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Any career option you consider should align with most of these. If an opportunity conflicts with your core values, it's probably not right, regardless of other benefits.

Example in practice:

If your top values are work-life balance, creative expression, and helping others, you might explore:

- Art therapy
- Freelance graphic design for charities
- Community arts programme coordination
- Teaching creative subjects

Step 8: Bridge the gap strategically

Once you've narrowed possibilities, think about realistic transition paths.

Bridge roles to consider:

Internal moves: Can you shift departments within your current organisation? This maintains income while testing new directions.

Part-time transitions: Reduce hours in your current role while building experience in your target area.

Adjacent moves: Identify roles that use your existing skills but in different contexts. For example:

- Teacher → Corporate trainer
- Software developer → Technical writer
- Retail manager → Operations coordinator
- Accountant → Financial advisor

Incremental skill building: Identify the 2-3 most critical skills for your target direction and develop them before fully transitioning.

Pro tip: The perfect straight-line path is rare. Most successful career changers take 2-3 steps to reach their eventual destination.

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Step 9: Build your transition plan

You don't need a complete roadmap, but you do need next steps.

Create a 3-month action plan:

Month 1: Exploration

- Complete informational interviews with 3 people
- Attend 2 industry events or webinars
- Read 3 books or take 1 short course in areas of interest
- Document what resonates and what doesn't

Month 2: Testing

- Begin one small experiment in your top area of interest
- Continue networking conversations
- Identify skill gaps for realistic possibilities
- Start building relevant skills (online courses, volunteering, etc.)

Month 3: Refinement

- Evaluate your experiments
- Narrow focus to 1-2 specific directions
- Create a transition timeline (6 months? 1 year? 2 years?)
- Begin positioning yourself (update LinkedIn, start relevant projects)
- Draft a CV that highlights transferable skills

Build in reflection time:

Schedule weekly 30-minute check-ins with yourself. What did you learn this week? What surprised you? What do you want to explore further?

When uncertainty persists: that's okay

Some people reach clarity quickly. Others need months or even years of exploration before identifying their next direction. Both paths are valid.

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Signs you're making progress even without clarity:

- You're actively exploring rather than staying stuck
- Your "absolutely not" list is getting more specific
- You've eliminated some possibilities through testing
- You're developing new skills or connections
- You feel less anxious about not having all the answers
- You're learning what energises vs. drains you

When to seek additional support:

If uncertainty persists despite active exploration, consider:

- **Career coaching:** Professional support in identifying options and creating action plans
- **Psychometric assessments:** Tools like Myers-Briggs or StrengthsFinder can reveal patterns
- **Therapy or counselling:** If career uncertainty stems from deeper anxiety or life circumstances
- **Peer support groups:** Connecting with others navigating similar transitions

Real examples: The messy reality of career pivots

Sarah, 38, former marketing manager:

"I knew I was burnt out in corporate marketing but had no idea what else I could do. I spent six months doing informational interviews across completely different fields, teaching, charity work, consulting, even event planning. Nothing clicked immediately. But through those conversations, I realised I loved the strategic thinking parts of marketing but hated the always-on digital nature. That led me to marketing consulting for smaller businesses where I could focus on strategy rather than execution. It took a year of experimenting before I made the leap."

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Michael, 45, former IT professional:

"I was stuck for ages because I kept thinking I needed to identify my 'dream job.' A mentor helped me realise I just needed to move toward something better, not perfect. I identified that I wanted more human interaction and clearer impact. That pointed me toward IT training roles. I did some volunteer training first, discovered I enjoyed it, and started looking for roles. I'm now a technical trainer. It's not my 'calling' but it's genuinely fulfilling in ways my previous role never was."

Priya, 29, former accountant:

"Everyone expected me to know exactly what I wanted to do next. The truth? I had no clue. I just knew accounting wasn't it. I gave myself permission to not know. I tried freelancing in completely unrelated areas (copywriting, bookkeeping for small businesses, even some photography work for events). Through that experimentation, I discovered I loved working with small business owners and helping them understand their finances. I'm now a financial coach for entrepreneurs. I never would have predicted this path."

Practical tools and resources

For skill identification:

- **Skills matcher tools:** National Careers Service skills assessment
- **Value assessment:** Free career values card sort exercises online
- **Personality insights:** Free versions of 16Personalities or similar tools

For exploration:

- **LinkedIn:** Follow people in interesting fields, observe their content and career paths
- **Reddit communities:** Career-specific subreddits offer honest insights
- **Professional associations:** Many offer free resources and networking events
- **Local career services:** Job Centre Plus and libraries often provide free career guidance

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For transition planning:

- **A Smart CV:** Store your complete work history and generate tailored CV's highlighting transferable skills for different career directions
- **OpenLearn:** Free short courses to test interests without commitment
- **Volunteering platforms:** Test potential careers through voluntary work

Final thoughts: Progress over perfection

Career pivots without a clear destination feel uncomfortable because our culture values certainty and linear progression. But genuine career satisfaction often comes from embracing uncertainty long enough to discover what truly fits.

You don't need to have everything figured out before taking action. You just need to take the next step, learn from it, and adjust accordingly.

Remember:

- Not knowing is a starting point, not a failure
- Small experiments beat endless contemplation
- Your first move doesn't have to be your final destination
- Transferable skills make you more adaptable than you think
- Career pivots are journeys, not decisions made in a single moment

The fact that you're reading this guide means you're already in motion. That's progress. Keep exploring, testing, and learning. Your next career is out there, you just need to walk toward it, even if you can't yet see exactly where it leads.

Need help presenting your transferable skills effectively as you explore new career directions? A Smart CV can help you create tailored CV's that highlight your relevant experience for different possibilities, giving you flexibility as you navigate your career change.



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Not knowing your destination is the first step in a transformative journey. This practical guide empowers career changers to uncover hidden strengths, explore diverse possibilities, and navigate the complexities of change with actionable steps. Embrace uncertainty and discover the rewarding path to a fulfilling career that aligns with your true values and aspirations.

