

Finding your niche(s)

Whether you're considering specialising, diversifying, sidestepping or a completely new focus, there are several stages to work through.

- You need to generate (or be exposed to) ideas before you can weigh them up as possibilities.
- You need to build an understanding of what's involved, so you can feel confident that a possibility could be transformed into a reality.
- You need to figure out how that idea might fit for you, personally.

The stages may not fall into a completely linear, step-by-step process as they can feed into each other. For example, while you're finding out more about an option, along the way you might discover another new idea that's also worth exploring. Similarly, as you're using your network to help test an idea, that might spark something new that you find more engaging so you can restart the process.

Keeping an open mind in spite of the challenging times is the best way to ensure you have access to the widest possible range of choices.

Often when I'm working on ideas, proverbs and sayings come into my mind, so I've included some of them as prompts. One that keeps coming to mind as a recurring theme over the last few months is one of my Grandmother's favourites, "it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good." A pandemic is indisputably bad news, but perhaps over time we will see that some good things can emerge from these difficult circumstances, too?

Here are three ways you could approach each of three stages to open up some new possibilities.

GENERATE:

Necessity is the mother of invention

There can be change without improvement, but there can be no improvement without change

1) Wishful thinking:

What if you couldn't fail? What if you followed your dreams? What if money was no barrier? What would your ten-year-old self advise?

2) Strengths and weaknesses:

Building on a solid foundation or aiming to fill a gap – either way you're getting something new in terms of either added depth or added breadth

3) Interests:

What has caught your eye recently? Can you combine different parts of your life into your professional life? Could you revive an old hobby? Might a new passion provide an anchor?

EXPLORE:

If the wind will not serve, take to the oars (my source says: destitutus ventis, remos adhibe)

Research is what I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing (Werner von Braun)

1) Careers information:

For new career ideas, what do different jobs actually involve? [Prospects Job Profiles](#) – written for students/graduates, but good coverage and quality information; [National Careers Service](#) – bad press recently, but a useful starting point.

2) Analyse opportunities:

Use intel about trends from professional bodies and industry groups or browse job adverts to identify patterns in requirements. A good way to identify learning needs/opportunities

3) Social media sources:

You don't need to actually know or link with people to benefit from LinkedIn, 'lurkers' can gain valuable information too. Whichever platforms you use, join groups, follow followers, search on job roles or companies of interest to get inspiration.

NETWORK:

Two heads are better than one / Many hands make light work

If you don't ask, you don't get (this is another of my Grandma's favourites – stay curious!)

1) Family and friends:

People who care about you can help generate ideas that link to facets of your personality or experience, as well as putting you in touch with new contacts. They can also help with practicalities and reality checking.

2) Insiders' views:

Consult with people in similar roles/organisations to those you're interested in to get the benefit of their experience and make sense of the knowledge gleaned from your desk research. Consider work shadowing as a next step, where practicable.

3) Coaching:

Whether formal or informal, it may be worth seeking support to develop and test ideas further. Self-help books or hiring a specialist can be a worthwhile small investment.

P.S. I'd be really delighted to know what the equivalents of these sayings are in other languages, so maybe you can work on that in the back of your minds, but please do leave space for your conscious brain to process the main points too!

Alexandra Hemingway, January 2021