Four Levels of Career Exploration

You will be faced with many important decisions in your life that have a big impact on who you become. It’s been said that, you make decisions, and then the decisions make you. To become successful, it’s critical to be active in exploring your options when you have an important decision to make. Take a look at the following scenario – buying a car – and notice the four levels of exploring options.

The “Buying a Car” Analogy

Look at all that is done to actively explore cars and make an educated decision on buying the right one (LEVEL 1: Read about Your Options). You can pick up brochures from various local car dealerships and browse through them. Lately, more and more people are heading to the Internet to check out cars. You can take it a step further and read up on these models of interest in various automobile consumer reports. (LEVEL 2: Talk to People) The next step is to start asking questions about some of these car prospects. You could talk to a friend or family member who knows more about cars than you do, or you can simply call a car dealership to speak with a salesperson and ask questions about the cars you’re interested in. (LEVEL 3: Observe Your Options) You’ll probably want to go to one or more of the local car dealerships and get a first-hand look at these vehicles. Therefore, you head over to a car lot and you go over to the section where the type of car you are looking for will be. You look closely over each car, checking out the color, the shape, the interior, and of course, the price. (LEVEL 4: Experience Your Options) There is still typically one last step – the test drive. Most car buyers are not ready to buy a car until they check it out first hand and take it for a test drive!

No matter what you’re deciding – what club to join, what internship to acquire, or what career to choose – make sure that you go through the four levels of exploration shown in the car model above to actively explore your options and make good decisions!

The 4 Levels of Career Exploration:

1. Read about your careers of interest
2. Talk to people in your careers of interest
3. Observe people in your careers of interest
4. Experience your careers of interest
Level 1: Read about your careers of interest
The first step to choosing a career that is right for you is to read about those careers that interest you. Too often, the title of a career sounds good, but once you read more about it, you may determine that it’s not a good fit. The most traditional way to read about careers is to pick up a book. Career Services has a Career Library which contains a whole section of books describing careers, such as The Occupational Outlook Handbook (JIST Publishing), The Dictionary of Occupational Titles (U.S. Department of Labor), and many others geared more specifically to a particular career field. Check with our career librarian or your career counselor to see what types of career exploration books may most useful for you. There are now many Internet sites that enable you to read up on and explore careers, such as WetFeet and Vault. You can also “google” a career of interest and you’ll find many sites describing that career.

Level 2: Talk to people in your careers of interest
The second step in actively exploring career options is to talk to professionals in careers of interest. We call this informational interviewing, since you will be interviewing professionals for information. Asking people who eat, sleep, and drink these careers about what they do on a daily basis and what they like and dislike about their career can tell you a lot! Information interviews can be conducted either in-person or over the phone. Some information interviews are even conducted via email these days. Talk to your career counselor about participating in Lion Link – a resource consisting of alumni mentors who volunteer and serve as career advisors. In addition, ask your parents, professors, and other personal contacts if they know of anybody in careers you’re considering.

Level 3: Observe people in your careers of interest
The third step in the exploration process is to get a closer LOOK at your career options of interest. We call this job shadowing. Job shadowing is when you tag along with or shadow professionals at work. You can shadow them for a few hours, a day, a week, or sometimes longer. While you don’t get to experience or perform the work directly, you do get to be at the work site and observe what goes on within that career field and company. You know the saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Well, that is at the essence of job shadowing. Through observing live professionals, you will get a good feel whether this line of work is for you or not.

Level 4: Experience your careers of interest
There’s no better or deeper way to explore careers than to experience them directly for a certain period of time. Essentially you are “test driving” a career to see if you like it. Several academic colleges at Penn State provide internship or co-op opportunities, so go and look into it. Also talk with the Career Librarian or a Career Counselor about the various internship resources available in Career Services. You can also experience a career through part-time jobs, community service, extra-curricular activities, and taking classes. Being a big brother or sister to a child in the community, for example, is a great way to explore Social Services careers.