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Unlikely Routes to Dream Careers

by Ysolt Usigan

As children, we decide we want to become doctors, astronauts, and rock stars. As we get older (and wiser), we hone in on our talents, skills, and passions to cultivate a career that suits us. Sometimes, what you take on "for the time being," ends up being your life's work, and you can't help but wonder: *What else is out there... What do I want to do the rest of my adult life... When will I land my dream job?*

Such questions fuel the tremendous growth of adults heading back to the classroom to turn long-held passions into career opportunities. In fact, a 1999 study by the National Household Education Survey (NHES) found consistent increases over the past few decades in the number of adults participating in some form of postsecondary education or training, and taking work-related courses. The number of adults returning to school has increased from 58 million in 1991 to 90 million in 1999. And that number is only growing with adult enrollments in college credential programs rising every year.

Take it from these dreamers: By applying a plan of action to your career goals, whether it's enrolling in a degree program or simply redirecting your existing skills elsewhere, you might find the career you always wanted, provided it lives up to your expectations.

The pursuit of career happiness

It wasn't hard for Peggy Kennedy to abandon her corporate, rat-race career. Although she had a bachelor of fine arts degree in musical theater from the Boston Conservatory, she had been working in a temperature-controlled office in a large financial institution to make ends meet. "I held that job for years mostly because I needed to pay off some debts," she explains. "I was paid well there." Even with her many roles as a manager/office manager/recruiter/financial analyst/research analyst/presentation coordinator, she admits she did nothing more than stare at a computer screen for most of the day.

"Although I would sneak out at lunchtime to teach spinning classes, go running, or work out at the gym, the break was never enough," recalls Kennedy. "On weekends I would try to cram all of my outdoor time and come back to work on Monday completely exhausted."

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Kennedy decided to take a leave of absence in 2004 to completely switch paths and work at an animal sanctuary, satisfying her childhood dream of working with animals. And, since she and her husband (who was her boyfriend at the time) were making a move to Los Angeles for his career, the career switch seemed even more feasible. "The first thing I did when I got to L.A. was start looking into work that would involve animals," she recalls.

Her research led to the discovery of a job opening with Fetch!, the largest pet-sitting and dog-walking franchise in the United States. The new Santa Monica location needed a daytime group exercise sitter, so Kennedy accepted the position. "I knew simply working as a sitter was not going to be sustainable over the long haul. I was putting about 100 miles per day on my car driving down to the west side (plus, driving the dogs around)," she explains. By the end of 2005, she made the decision to put down the initial deposit to start her own Fetch! franchise. She was confident.

Since doing so, Kennedy's venture has proven lucrative—in more ways than one. "I get to play with dogs all day," she points out, "and I've hired dispatchers to help free my time so I can finally do other things I enjoy." Kennedy's love for animals has also led her to spend 8 to 12 hours a week doing volunteer work with animal rescue groups.

As Kennedy attests, it is possible to transform something you love into something lucrative. "Your dream job may not be exactly what you expected," she says, "but if you are willing to make some minor sacrifices at the start, you can turn it into everything you want it to be."

When dreams don't live up

Jason Keith, public relations manager, has a very different dream job story. Straight out of college, all Keith wanted to do was be a sports journalist. "Growing up in Boston, my dream was to someday cover the Red Sox for the *Boston Globe* or the *Boston Herald*," he explains.

Keith got his shot at journalism. He was given an opportunity to become a sports editor for a local newspaper covering area sports teams (mostly high school, but some college and private schools). He thought his dream had come true. "I was covering games; interacting with great kids, coaches, and local figures; living their joys and sorrows with them; and becoming a part of their community," he recalls. "But at the same time, I was covering four towns, writing more than 20 stories a week, and working two part-time jobs

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just to make ends meet."

After five years, Keith's dream job as a writer was earning him only \$24,000 a year, less than what most entry-level positions that rely on writing skills, such as editorial assistants and other reporters at larger market papers, would earn. And that figure never seemed to increase. Keith found himself making doughnuts at night and in the early morning. "I hadn't seen a normal work week in years--most of them consisted of 60-plus hours just to keep my head

above water financially," he explains. "I did it because I loved it, period." As Keith spent more time in the newspaper biz, it became apparent that his "dream job" was more like a financial nightmare.

"I decided to take my career in another direction," he says. He parlayed his writing and reporting skills into becoming a public relations associate. In a little over two years, he became a manager of an online print company in the Massachusetts area where he's earning triple his previous salary.

Although it's not how he envisioned his career, Keith says he is content with his modified dream job. And as for covering the Red Sox, forget it. "I managed to go to a game as a press member last season and got a firsthand look at how the beat reporters handle the job and how they're treated," he says. "That was an eye-opening experience. I left the ballpark thinking 'they couldn't pay me double what I'm making now to do that!' You get treated as if you have leprosy by the players, are crowded around 40 other guys in a smelly locker room, and work until 1 AM every day."

Despite giving his dream job a shot, Keith says it wasn't what he'd imagined. "I'm sure some people get to land that dream job and live happily ever after, but I sure didn't."

Reigniting old passions

After receiving a bachelor of science degree in education with a concentration in foreign languages, Renay Picard worked as a French and Spanish teacher for a few years. She then served as an international consultant for a major relocation firm, which helped employees with moving arrangements during job transitions. Though Picard was fully utilizing her language skills in the corporate arena, she couldn't help but feel stifled by her career. "While this job was interesting for awhile, much of the day-to-day became mundane and predictable over time," she explains. "I knew I needed more out of my career."

That "something more" stemmed from her childhood passion for the arts. Assuming she couldn't earn a good living by using her creativity, Picard had put that love on the back burner. But eventually, she started exploring artistic possibilities to help her climb out of her

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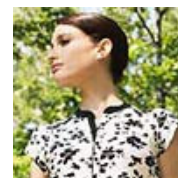
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corporate rut. She took a risk and went back to school full time to obtain a certificate in Web design at Boston University's Continuing Education Center [an MSN Encarta advertiser] when she was 30 years old. The risk was a savvy one as the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports the graphic-design field is expected to have high job growth through 2014; those with Web site design and animation experience will garner the best opportunities. "It was an intensive four-month full-time program, but I decided to go this route (instead of attending part-time) because I wanted to make a career shift as quickly as possible," she explains.

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Within weeks of finishing the program, Picard landed a position in the marketing department of a software company. "I was offered a consulting job after being recommended by one of the faculty," she points out. "The position started off being mainly Web and graphic design, but quickly blossomed into full-blown marketing campaigns, public relations, branding activities, and event planning."

After taking some time off to raise her son, Picard headed back to work for a small sales training firm called Basho Strategies. Over four years, she worked closely with the CEO to build the company into a multimillion-dollar organization with more than 100 clients. "Now I run all the marketing activities," says the recently promoted vice president. "I've grown so much, both personally and professionally. I look forward to coming in to work every day."

Picard advises, "Even if you don't see the big dollar signs to start, if you love something enough, it can eventually lead to greater benefits—both financially and personally."

While the path to success is sometimes a long and winding road, with a little creativity, self-improvement, and risk-taking, you can achieve career fulfillment as these dreamers did. But before you dive into something new, come up with a game plan, be realistic, and do what it takes to achieve your dreams.

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