

Terri Apter (Senior Tutor) talk to Newnham Associates' Career Workshop
"Getting work in Tough Times"
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I spent three years serving on the Careers syndicate, and I spent many more years talking to students on a range of topics, including making the first step out of University and into a career. Repeatedly I was stymied by the anxiety that accompanied these early career decisions, but as I listened to young adults I gradually came to understand the emotional heft of this anxiety and its context, and on occasion I even found ways to diffuse it.

Making choices is a crucial and creative activity. We become who we are, and construct our lives, through the choices we make. Choice, if anyone remembers New Labour ideology, is seen as a libertarian ideal: the more choices the better; choice involves freedom. But there is a psychological phenomenon known as the paradox of choice. It has been observed that the more choices one has the less satisfaction one is likely to feel in the choice one makes. The activity of making choices involves imaginatively engaging with different possibilities, and as we engage, we feel a kind of ownership and enjoyment. When we choose one thing, and not those others, we feel a loss because we are cut off from something we took some pleasure in imagining. Choice does not merely involve freedom; it also involves constraint. In choosing one direction, we forego another. In committing ourselves to one path, we turn away from others.

Some young people at this stage suffer from what I call "potentialitis" – high achievers are particularly prone to this when they feel that no available option quite rises to their high expectations. At the same time, doing nothing is a terrible option. They may hope that doing nothing will provide further time for reflection, but procrastination may turn stale. In this state they remain dependent on their parents – and though I personally think this is no bad thing in and of itself, it is usually uncomfortable and demanding for a young adult. I disagree with the view that remaining dependent when you are a young adult is a symptom of being immature or irresponsible; I think that it really does take a long time to attain what we think of as the markers of adulthood – longer than in previous generations, because to join the adult world today, you are expected to have more education and training and maturity than can reasonably be expected of someone in her very early 20s. A complex adulthood requires a longer apprenticeship. But I also know that young people are itching to become independent and exercise and extend their skills. This eagerness does not always make making a decision easier. One young woman complained: "The question, 'What should I do?' keeps echoing in my brain. I feel caught in an echo chamber." And another young adult at the stage I call the threshold years, between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood, just at the doorway to grown up life, but not quite through that door, admitted, "I keep going around in circles, I feel like I'm failing because I can't decide."

Sometimes to escape what I call decision paralysis, when you just stare at one job spec after another, and cannot make a real go of the process of looking for work, there is a temptation to become a manic decider. Every day you feel sure you know precisely what you should do, you know what is best – but the fact that the perfect job, the perfect route keep changing is unsettling. Decision paralysis can have a domino effect: you can lose faith in your ability to decide anything, and instead of focusing on what you should do, you can focus on how well others are doing, and you wallow in envy.

Whereas your parents may be saying, "You have your whole life in front of you," whereas they look on opportunity, you may be experiencing close up, uncomfortably close up, the constraints of life in the workplace. There are frustrations, there is the possibility of boredom, there is also the possibility of failure that is daunting. Instead of seeing the open road that adults see before you, you may be looking at them and, with a sinking heart, realize you may

soon be one of them. Some reluctance to make a real first step into a career is understandable ambivalence about joining the adult world.

Choice involves uncertainty, but uncertainty is something we need to tolerate to take positive steps each day. Uncertainty does not have to be confusing or scary. The research I've done on successful women in midlife shows that strong career paths were not always shaped by having plans and goals or even by having specific ambitions. Success was often shaped by happenstance, but these women put themselves in situations in which they experienced new things and accepted the uncertainties of change. Most important is that they were ready to rise to a challenge and were not daunted by failure. They learned from their failures, and were not ashamed.

No one is able to see the way ahead as clearly as we would like, and today's world has its particular brand of uncertainty. There are fewer well defined paths. Your personal and professional terrain will have to be negotiated and renegotiated several times over in the course of your 20s. The best way to move ahead, when you cannot see as far ahead as you want, is to take one step – any step – and to appreciate the skills that any job involves. It's useful to think in terms of a good-enough job. "Good-enough" is the adjective that psychologists apply to parents who do not totally mess up their children: they may not be perfect; they may make many mistakes; their children may have lots of legitimate complaints about them; but nonetheless, but they allow their children to develop and to thrive. A good-enough job gets you some experience and some knowledge of what you might want to know when you take your next career step. During the next five years you'll be developing interests and skills that you can even name as yet. Making a decision is a matter of getting to a next step, not being fixed to a straight path. Keep a lively imagination and an open mind and be ready to rise to a challenge and you will be in the best position to make the best of any decision you make.