Around We Go

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF MAKING CAREER DECISIONS

Online mapping programs make it easy to plug in an address and wait for turn-by-turn directions complete with colorful graphics. Wouldn’t it be great if such a program were available for your life? Just plug in your coordinates, fill up the tank, put it in drive, and off you go! While such a program does not exist as yet, you can develop the tools you need to set your course and plot your destination. As with online mapping, you will also need to learn how to adjust those plans as unforeseen obstacles as well as distracting curiosities grab your attention. If you share the hope that most people do (namely that your career choice will bring you satisfaction, stability, and success), then it’s important to learn how to reach your career destination.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce you to the developmental process of making career decisions. In particular, you’ll learn about the process of career and life development as conceptualized by the world-renowned Dr. Donald Super. You’ll learn about the various stages of career development that we experience throughout our lives and the tasks associated with each stage. You’ll also have the chance to reflect on your experiences and consider their role in shaping your career interests and values. Finally, you’ll be given the opportunity to determine which stage of career development you’re currently experiencing and which career exploration activities presented in this book are most relevant to your life situation.

THE PROCESS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Making career decisions is anything but a static process. People you meet and experiences that happen to you as well as the way you respond to those experiences and integrate them into your life all contribute to your career development. Career decision making is a lifelong process that everyone experiences over and over again.

If you had met with a career counselor in the early 1900s, that counselor probably would have given you a few assessments, analyzed the results, and told you which occupations (based on your interests, skills, and values) provided the best fit for you. Odds are...
that you would have followed the counselor’s advice and entered a career that you
probably would have remained in for the next 40 years. Luckily career counselors
have changed with the times! It is extremely rare for a person to make a career deci-
sion around age 18 and stick with it for life. With rapidly shifting changes in the
economy and the constant creation of new jobs and technologies, millions of people
find themselves reliving the career decision-making process year after year. That’s why
many career counselors use the phrases “career development” or “career transitions”
when referring to the process of making career decisions. Career changes and transi-
tions involve a developmental process that will recur throughout your lifetime.
That’s why it’s so important that you learn about the process involved in making effec-
tive career decisions so that you can become your own best career manager.

DONALD SUPER’S THEORY OF CAREER
DEVELOPMENT

As with just about any other area of human behavior, counselors and psychologists
have developed several theories in an attempt to explain what happens during the
career decision-making process. One of the most universally accepted theories of
career decision making was developed by Dr. Donald Super, whose theory of career
and life development was one of the first to describe career decision making as a de-
velopmental process that spans one’s entire lifetime. Super believed that the degree
to which a given individual’s career development is successful depends—at least in
part—on how well that person is able to identify and implement her or his career
self-concept.

According to Super, your career self-concept is directly influenced by your per-
sonality, abilities, interests, experiences, and values. Suppose, for example, that you
have the natural ability to listen attentively to others while they’re speaking. Suppose
that you’re also good at expressing concern for others and helping them find solu-
tions to their problems. These particular attributes suggest that a career in one of the
helping professions might be appropriate. However, if you have
little or no interest in the helping professions, then spending
hours and hours exploring such career options would probably be
a waste of time. Super argued that the best career choices people
can make are those that provide avenues for implementing as
many parts of their self-concept as possible.

Your career self-concept, according to Super, is a product of the interaction of
your personality, interests, experiences, skills, and values and of the ways in which
you integrate these characteristics into your various life roles. As you experience new
situations, meet new people, and learn more about the world of work, you’re likely to
develop a new set of interests, unlock new possibilities of expressing your self-concept,
and find new ways of integrating your values into the career choice process.

If you’re like most people, it’s very likely that throughout your life you’ll find
yourself in situations that require you to reconsider your career direction. This may
be the result of economic changes or trends. Perhaps it will be related to techno-
logical advances. It may simply be “time for a change.” Your interests may change. Your
values may change. Even aspects of your personality may change. That’s why it’s so
important for you to learn how to make good career decisions. That way, no matter
when the need or desire for a career change arises, you’ll be ready to tackle the
challenge.

Super described career development as consisting of five distinct stages (summa-
rized in adjacent box). Whether you’re engaging in the career decision-making
process for the first time or recycling through the process for the tenth time, you’ll
probably be able to determine which stage best characterizes your current situation.
The Developmental Process of Making Career Decisions

Growth

According to Super, the first stage of career development is the growth stage. During this stage people form attitudes and behaviors that are important for the development of their self-concept and learn about the general nature of the world of work. According to Super, our interactions with the social environment influence our personal expectations and goals. Experiences we have with other people and the work we are exposed to throughout our lives directly affect the development of our career-related attitudes and our beliefs about the world of work. Super believed that all children and young adolescents are in the growth stage of career development. But younger people aren’t the only ones forming attitudes about careers and learning about the world of work. Many adults—especially those who are still learning about career opportunities—find themselves in the growth stage, too.

Summary of Super’s Stages of Career Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>BASIC FOCUS ASSOCIATED WITH EACH STAGE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Learning about the world of work as you increase your awareness of your personality, interests, abilities, experiences, and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Crystallizing, specifying, and implementing a career choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment</td>
<td>Gaining work experiences and evaluating your experiences in occupations associated with your career choice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>Developing stability within a chosen career field as you seek ways to improve working conditions and increase skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>Exploring new ways to spend your time away from your current work environment; might include a career change or retirement from full-time employment.</td>
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CASE STUDIES TO CONSIDER

Lauren

Lauren was a 21-year-old woman characteristic of someone in the growth stage of career development. She was in her junior year at a university, where she had been majoring in education. Lauren was the first person in her family ever to go to college. Her mother and father were extremely supportive of her desire to obtain a college degree, but—primarily because of their lack of college experience—they weren’t able to offer Lauren sound advice and direction regarding the educational process.

Nevertheless, Lauren was aware that career counseling and academic advising services were available at the university, so she met with a career counselor to begin that process. One of the first things Lauren talked about was her decision to major in education. She explained to her counselor that she originally decided education would be a good avenue to pursue because there seemed to be a lot of available teaching jobs in the area. It was very
Chapter 1

The second stage of the career development process is **exploration**, considered by many to be the heart of the career decision-making process. Super described the exploration stage of career development as consisting of three major developmental tasks: crystallizing, specifying, and implementing a career choice.

### Crystallizing

During the crystallizing task, career dreaming occurs. Some of the options identified during the crystallizing period might someday be realized, but most of the options identified at this point are more idealistic than realistic.

**CASE STUDIES TO CONSIDER**

**Tempest**

Tempest was a star basketball player and sophomore political science major at a large southern university. Her primary goal was to continue her athletics career by playing in the WNBA, but she also wanted to prepare herself for life after basketball. When she first went to counseling she had an impressive list of things she wanted to be from astronaut to zoologist! Her mother was a local politician and her father a physician, and Tempest had the confidence to know that she could do anything she set her mind to. Tempest exemplified the **crystallizing** stage in that she was dreaming and fantasizing about all kinds of possibilities. Rather than asking her to narrow down her list or “get real” in terms of her goals, the counselor encouraged her to explore and learn more about the fields that held the most curiosity for her. During this exploration period, she learned a great deal about many fields, which eventually helped her discard options in which the reality did not measure up to the idealistic notions she held. Tempest suffered a number of injuries while in college and eventually decided to give up her goal of playing in the WNBA. She took a year off after school to work in various health-care settings and eventually went on to medical school.

Effective career decision making requires an element of dreaming about a variety of career futures. One of your career dreams might be a very unrealistic option. But there usually comes a time when it’s important to shift from several unrealistic career goals to a few more realistic options.

### Specifying

The second major developmental task of the exploration stage of career development is **specifying**. The specifying task of career exploration involves narrowing down career aspirations to a few options worthy of more detailed exploration.
Implementing

The third and final task of the exploration stage of career development involves implementing a career choice. As we begin to narrow career options and work toward making a tentative career choice, we need to strive for an increased understanding of our career self-concept. Taking into account our personality, interests, abilities, experiences, and values, coupled with an informed awareness of the world of work, we’re equipped with the tools needed to make high-quality career decisions. Implementing a career choice means obtaining relevant education and/or training related to an occupation. It’s an advanced phase of career exploration but not the end of it.

CASE STUDIES TO CONSIDER

Gabriella

Consider the case of Gabriella, a 38-year-old woman whose youngest child recently entered kindergarten. After several years of enjoying a career as a homemaker and dabbling in various types of arts and crafts, Gabriella decided to return to college.

In order to help focus her time and make the best use of her tuition money, Gabriella decided to spend a few months researching several careers that interested her.

Gabriella began the exploration process by looking into nursing, teaching, engineering, and court reporting. She also considered starting up a business of her own. It was apparent to Gabriella that many of the careers she originally considered weren’t very realistic options after all. Some (e.g., teaching and engineering) required more education than she was willing to complete. Others (e.g., court reporting and nursing) didn’t allow her the flexibility that she was seeking in a new career. Gabriella was a prime example of someone working through the specifying task of career exploration.

For an example of someone who is experiencing the early stages of implementing a career choice, let’s return to Gabriella. After narrowing down her list of career options during the specifying period of exploration, in the implementing phase
Gabriella focused on careers that would allow her to fully implement her self-concept. She tried to figure out which career options fit best with her personality, abilities, interests, experiences, and values. Careful analysis of information Gabriella gathered helped her conclude that starting up her own arts and crafts business was the best option to pursue. Gabriella attended small-business seminars, acquired skills associated with running a business, and even obtained a small-business loan from the government.

The majority of the chapters in this book focus on the exploration stage of career development. In each chapter, you’ll learn how to integrate your self-concept, your knowledge about the world of work, and your understanding of employment opportunities to make the very best career decisions you possibly can.

### Establishment

Once you’ve completed the exploration stage of career development, you’ll enter the **establishment** stage, where you’ll gain work experience associated with your career choice. It’s a time for trying out your choice to determine if it’s a good one.

### Case Studies to Consider

#### Roberto

Roberto was in the process of changing careers. After 15 years of working for the same company, Roberto decided that being a draftsperson wasn’t as challenging or rewarding as it once was. After several months of career exploration, Roberto decided to pursue a career in radio broadcasting.

Roberto always had an interest in radio and even worked for a commercial radio station part-time during college. When it was time to declare a major, however, Roberto was afraid he might be discriminated against because of his Hispanic background when it came to finding a full-time job in the radio industry. He knew that the job market in radio was extremely tough to break into, and he wasn’t aware of many Hispanic people who ever made it in broadcasting.

After Roberto and his career counselor talked about barriers presented by discrimination and the many avenues for overcoming these barriers (discussed later in this book), Roberto gained some of the confidence he needed to pursue his lifelong interest in radio. Soon thereafter he obtained a newscasting position at a local radio station. During the first few months on the job, Roberto gained a much better sense of what a career in radio broadcasting was all about. He learned about advancement possibilities within the industry, discovered what skills he needed to develop, and gained a clearer perspective about broadcasting careers in general.

During this initial employment phase, Roberto learned that he enjoyed broadcasting even more than he thought he would. Today Roberto is the general manager of one of the most popular radio stations in Los Angeles and has become a role model for other Hispanic broadcasters.

#### Maintenance

The fourth stage of the career development process is the **maintenance** stage, where stability within a particular career becomes the primary objective. Most persons in the maintenance stage continue to improve working conditions and experience
growth and development within their chosen careers. Others, however, realize that they’re in need of a different career altogether.

**CASE STUDIES TO CONSIDER**

**Janelle**

Janelle was a participant in a career counseling group for college alumni. She had been an elementary school teacher for 12 years and was well established in that role. While she enjoyed the stability of the *maintenance* stage of her teaching career, she was becoming bored and was frustrated with some of the political aspects of working in public education. Although she had not definitely decided to leave teaching, she wanted to explore other opportunities. Janelle participated in all of the group activities and began listing careers that were related to teaching but that held more excitement for her. She then engaged in research surrounding alternative education for at-risk students and was connected with a wilderness program for youth offenders. Over the next year, she took evening courses in counseling and eventually began working with the same program. While Janelle’s teaching career moved from the *maintenance* stage to the *disengagement* stage of development, her youth programming career moved from the *implementing* stage to *establishment*.

**Disengagement**

In the last stage of career development, *disengagement*, there is a reduction in the role that particular work plays in one’s life. Individuals in the disengagement stage make a decision to retire or to change careers altogether. Keeping in mind that career decision making is a lifelong process, it’s important to note that disengagement can occur several times throughout one’s work history. Eventually the disengagement stage is when people retire from work altogether, but for many people disengagement represents a transition from one career to another.

Remember, career decision making is a developmental process that varies from person to person. You may find yourself in the growth stage of development at the same time that one of your friends who’s the same age you are seems to be pretty well established in a career and has moved on to the stage of maintenance. You might be disengaging from a career that you thought you’d be in until retirement. Perhaps you’re now faced with the need to go back and reacquaint yourself with the world of work and begin the process of career exploration all over again. If so, don’t despair. As mentioned earlier, recycling through the stages of career development is becoming more and more of a reality for almost everyone.

**DETERMINING WHERE YOU ARE IN THE PROCESS**

If you learn how to engage in effective career exploration, you’ll master the tools needed for making good career decisions. Learning about the career decision-making process begins as you increase your self-understanding. Exercises 1.1, “Your Career Autobiography,” and 1.2, “Identifying Your Career Needs,” will assist you in determining where you are in the career decision-making process. Then in later chapters you’ll complete several exercises that will assess your personality, interests, abilities, experiences, values, and life themes. Each of these exercises will increase your awareness of your self-concept as you prepare to embark on the important journey of career exploration and planning.
EXERCISE 1.1
YOUR CAREER AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This exercise is designed to help you figure out where you are in terms of the five developmental stages of career decision making.

In the space provided on the next page, write a brief, informal autobiography of experiences in your life that are relevant to your career development. You might begin by describing your career dreams, including occupations you named when you were young and someone asked you, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Discuss how your career dreams have influenced some of the decisions you’ve made up to this point.

Also be sure to list any jobs, volunteer work, or internships you’ve had. Explain how these experiences provided you with information about your interests and skills. Hobbies, leisure activities, and athletic participation also should be included in your autobiography.

Be sure to mention any significant events that have played a role in previous career decisions. Reflect upon the many ways that your cultural and ethnic background, socioeconomic status, gender, and religious beliefs have influenced your career decisions.

Finally, conclude your autobiography with a discussion of the various career issues you’re facing today and strategies you plan to use to address these issues.

Before you actually begin to write your autobiography, take some time to think about and brainstorm what you want to include in it. Self-reflection is especially important in this exercise.

Many students we've worked with over the years claim that there isn’t much for them to include in a career autobiography at this point. They mention that they’ve only held a couple of part-time jobs over the years and don’t have any work experience worth mentioning.

Perhaps you find yourself in the same situation. If so, remember that most of your important decisions could be considered career related. If you are in high school, what extracurricular activities do you do? If you are in college, how did you choose where to attend school? Think about part-time work experiences, things you’ve volunteered to help with, or things you’ve done with family and friends. All of these things are important in your life, so they are important in your story. The degree to which you’ve enjoyed any previous experiences plays an important role in career decision making. All of your thoughts and feelings about making career decisions—whether seemingly insignificant or not—should be included in your autobiography.

Topics to consider as you prepare your autobiography include the following:

- Career dreams
- Previous paid employment experiences
- Volunteer experiences
- Internship activities
- Hobbies
- Leisure interests
- Athletic participation
- Ethnic background and heritage
- Socioeconomic status
- Gender roles
- Current educational status
- Current employment status
- Questions about your future
- Careers that seem interesting to you
- Career-related issues you’re facing
Career Autobiography

(If you need additional space for your story, please attach extra pages.)
EXERCISE 1.2  IDENTIFYING YOUR CAREER NEEDS

By completing your autobiography, you’ve probably learned something about yourself and about your career development up to this point. You can greatly increase your awareness of your self-concept by reflecting on experiences.

To determine which developmental stage you’re in now, go back to your autobiography and highlight (or draw a circle around) any information that describes your current situation. Although most of this material will probably be at the end of your autobiography, there may be reference to your current career status in earlier portions of your autobiography as well. Any information that explains issues you’re facing or the decisions you’re hoping to make in the near future should be highlighted in some way to signify its relevance to your current situation.

Now compare the information you’ve highlighted in your career autobiography with the chart in Table 1.1. Check the boxes that correspond with the stages of career development that you most directly identify with at this time. Once you’ve completed this exercise, you should have a pretty good idea of where you are in the career development process.

The far right column of the table suggests the career needs you’re likely to be facing at this point in your career development, along with the chapters of this book that you’ll find especially helpful in your current developmental stage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.1 Summary of career development stages.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STAGE OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
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<td>Exploration</td>
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(continued)
### The Developmental Process of Making Career Decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT</th>
<th>TYPES OF TASKS</th>
<th>SAMPLE AUTOBIOGRAPHY STATEMENTS</th>
<th>CAREER NEEDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishment</td>
<td>(1) Gaining work experiences related to your career choice</td>
<td>“I’m currently working in a job that will allow me the chance to see if I really want to pursue that career or not.”</td>
<td>Continue the process of self-awareness (Chapters 1–5, 9)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Trying to determine the value of your choices</td>
<td>“Now that I’m working in this field, I’m not sure that my job is really meeting my needs.”</td>
<td>Decide whether your values are being addressed in your current job (Chapter 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Continuing to increase self-understanding</td>
<td>“I’m learning a lot about myself as I continue to work in this field.”</td>
<td>Set goals for gaining new experiences in a career area (Chapter 9)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(4) Beginning to stabilize within a career</td>
<td>“I’m satisfied with my current career.”</td>
<td>Evaluate current job satisfaction (Appendix E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>(1) Determining whether your current career situation is providing adequate satisfaction and fulfillment</td>
<td>“Lately I’ve been trying to determine whether I’m truly happy doing what I’m doing.”</td>
<td>Determine whether to remain in a current job (Chapters 1–5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m starting to think that maybe I should find out about other careers.”</td>
<td>Evaluate current job satisfaction (Appendix E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Searching for ways to increase job mobility</td>
<td>“Right now I’m trying to determine whether there is any chance that I might be promoted in the future.”</td>
<td>Learn about other careers related to your job (Chapter 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Learning about other career options related to your current occupation</td>
<td>“I’m hoping that I will find some other jobs similar to my current one that I can consider applying for.”</td>
<td>Learn about methods for locating new job opportunities (Appendix D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>(1) Considering a new job or career change</td>
<td>“I’m pretty sure that I want to find a new job. This one is getting old.”</td>
<td>Determine the appropriateness of a career change (Chapters 6 and 7, Appendix E)</td>
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As you can see, the main focus of this book is on the process of career exploration. So, now that you’re aware of how the chapters that follow apply to your particular developmental stage, let the journey begin!

**QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL THOUGHT**

1. Why is career decision making considered a developmental process?
2. How can you learn more about your self-concept (i.e., your personality, interests, skills, experiences, and values) as it relates to making career choices?
3. What types of experiences are helpful for someone to have during the exploration stage of career development?
4. Why is it important to consider the educational and work-related experiences you’ve had as you begin the exploration stage of career decision making?

**KEY CONCEPTS TO REMEMBER**

- Career decision making is a lifelong process.
- Your career self-concept is a product of the interaction of your personality, interests, experiences, skills, and values, and the ways in which you integrate these characteristics into your various life roles.
- Learning how to engage in effective career exploration will give you the tools you'll need for making good career decisions throughout your life.