We all have possibilities we don’t know about. We can do things we don’t even dream we can do.

—Dale Carnegie
Introducing Career Flow

OBJECTIVES
This chapter focuses on the career flow metaphor. After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe the career flow metaphor
- Understand the relationship between career flow and self-awareness
- Understand the importance of career flow

CASE STUDY
Alice met with her career counselor at State University to discuss her recently completed summer work experience. She had worked with an accounting firm as an intern between her junior and senior years of college. She was concerned that she found her workdays fun, boring, challenging, fast-paced, and more. Entering her first work experience related to her academic major, she expected to find each day to be enjoyable and meaningful. Alice was thrown by the variability in her experience. Although there were many positive moments, there were also moments that were anything but positive. Is this how it was supposed to be? Did her negative experiences mean she had chosen the wrong career and/or the wrong academic major? She felt panic as she considered these questions while walking to the career center for her appointment. She hoped her career counselor would be able to reassure her, but she wasn't sure what to expect.
Alice’s first work experience related to her academic major was a bit of a “shocker.” It was good, bad, positive, and negative. She was excited to enter the internship and looked forward to her work. What she had not planned for were the challenges she encountered. Alice was having trouble integrating these experiences into her overall understanding of what a work experience should be like. In essence, she had expected her experience to flow much more smoothly. The “rough waters” she encountered in her internship and their implications for her future plans shook her. Were they signs of a poor career choice? Were they indications of issues she needed to address in order to become a better prospective employee? What should she think at this point, and what should she do?

The answers to these questions, to a great degree, depend on how you conceptualize career development. Often, people think about work the same way they think about—and sometimes question—relationships. Specifically, a person might wonder if difficult times could mean a poor choice in a partner or, in Alice’s instance, a career. Although this can be true, it would be unrealistic to expect one’s work (and one’s relationships) to always be blissful and positive. In all careers, there are challenges and rewards. Sometimes, things go smoothly—perhaps even effortlessly. There are other times, however, when it feels like a constant uphill struggle. There are times of excitement and times of boredom. Thus, in managing your career effectively, it is important to be able to handle the positive as well as the challenging aspects of your work. To be sure, there are times when changing a job (or a partner) may make the most sense but, many times, navigating your career experiences effectively depends on having a realistic understanding of work, a confident and positive attitude, and the requisite skills to handle what comes your way.

The Career Flow Metaphor

The career flow metaphor was developed during a bike ride along the banks of the Fraser River in British Columbia, Canada. Observing the many currents of the river led to the notion that these currents seemed similar to the many dimensions of the work experience. Although that statement may seem a bit unusual at first, take a moment to think about it. A river has rapids, still waters, eddies, steady currents, twists, and bends. Depending on the currents, navigating them can be easy, challenging, overwhelming, or boring. In a similar way, your career will have moments when work demands will be overwhelming; moments when the work demands will be minimal; and moments when your work tasks will occur at a steady and manageable rate. There will be unexpected challenges and predictable moments. You will encounter tasks for which you will feel well prepared and those for which you feel totally unprepared. Each dimension of your work experience will require you to respond 

*It is important to adapt to changes.*

![Bike riding on a river](image-url)
in specific ways to manage your career effectively. Having a realistic attitude toward work and possessing the requisite skills for handling the challenges you will undoubtedly experience will help you to be a positive employee and to experience maximal work satisfaction. In other words, your attitude and skills will go a long way in determining the outcome of your work behavior; that is, whether you are successful. Because work experiences vary in ways that resemble how a river flows, we have chosen to use the term career flow to help you acquire a full understanding of the career experience.

Before offering further explanation regarding this term, we invite you to consider what comes to mind when you hear the term career flow. Take a moment right now to write down anything you think of related to this term.

Each time this question has been posed, a wide range of responses emerges. Here are some of those responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serendipitous</th>
<th>Floating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rate of travel</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danger</td>
<td>Energizing</td>
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<td>Positive growth</td>
<td>Organic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compelling</td>
<td>Directional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal-focused</td>
<td>Consuming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Going with the flow</td>
<td>Natural</td>
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<td>Sense of ease</td>
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Interestingly, these words describe positive experiences—for example, positive growth, energizing, uplifting—as well as what many might view as less than positive experiences—lack of control, danger. So which is correct? Does the term career flow depict a positive energizing experience or does it involve dangerous experiences over which one has little control? Based on what you have read thus far, you likely have surmised that it is both.

With each different experience of the river, you had to use certain strategies and skills to navigate that particular part of the river successfully. For example, in whitewater, strong paddling skills and knowledge of river currents were required to navigate the rapids. In still water, you needed to generate momentum using your power and strength to move along the river. When the challenges of the river matched your skill
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ACTIVITY 1.1

Imagine you are paddling a canoe down a river. As you move along, note your areas of comfort versus stress and enjoyment versus boredom. Notice what the experience is like as you paddle through slow, still water. Now imagine the currents shifting to an extended “whitewater” experience as the current reaches maximum speed. Consider the varying levels of effort and the different skills required to paddle your canoe at various places on the river. As the currents change, so too do the skills and effort required. Do you have a preference for one type of current over the others?

What did you like about each part of the river?

What did you not like about each part of the river?

level, then it was likely that you experienced a positive journey as you moved through the water. When the challenges exceeded your resources, you may have felt overwhelmed and discouraged. When your resources surpassed the challenges, then you may have felt bored and stagnant.

There are similarities between how you must navigate different aspects of how the river flows and the challenges you encounter in your career journey. At all times in your career, specific strengths and characteristics become essential for managing how your career flows. Developing these strengths increases your ability to manage your career flow in a way you find satisfying.

Too often, people approach their careers with unrealistic expectations; that is, they seem to be searching for the ultimate occupational opportunity that brings with it constant satisfaction, meaning, and purpose. Alice certainly brought this expectation with her into her internship. Although that expectation is clearly desirable, you may be setting yourself up for failure if you expect your work experience to be characterized primarily by such positive conditions. Alice was thrown by these realities. Her less than ideal experiences caused her to question her occupational choice. She was applying unrealistic expectations to her work experience. In this sense, there really are no occupational nirvanas—all work experiences have their joys and their challenges.

However, there are occupations that provide many hours of satisfying work in which you use the skills you value as you engage in activities you find interesting. Likewise, there are occupations that will provide you with the opportunity to interact with people who possess similar values and interests. Occupations that will add to the sense of meaning and purpose you find in your life can also be found.

Undoubtedly, even in these very positive situations, however, you will also experience challenges. On some days, things will not go as you prefer, coworkers
Managing your career development effectively requires a substantial amount of career- and self-awareness. This is particularly true when you encounter challenges in your career. The career flow metaphor is designed to help you think in new ways about challenges you encounter and the strategies you can use to manage those challenges. This is especially true with challenges you have struggled with for an extended period of time (for many, making an occupational choice is one of those challenges). It is easy in these situations to begin to feel hopeless and maybe even helpless. You can begin to feel there is no clear solution to your challenge. For example, perhaps you have struggled for some time to identify a college major you feel excited about. Perhaps you have even selected a major only to find later that it was not what you thought it was and you were left feeling confused and unsure once again. Perhaps, a bit like Alice, you felt stuck in your career development. If you currently are in a situation similar to this, then the career flow metaphor may help you to think systematically about your career journey.

It is important not to confuse career flow with flow, a term used in psychology that refers to peak or optimal experiences in living. In this book, the term career flow is
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used in a much broader sense, representing the total work experience—both positive and negative. Each dimension of career flow plays an important part in shaping your life; however, the contribution of the different facets of career flow often is not recognized. For instance, when overwhelmed by the demands of work, we often are unable to appreciate the lessons to be learned in such moments. Other times, we may wonder where the challenge is and feel as if “the thrill is gone” from our daily work activities and interpret our work experiences as meaningless. Still other times, we may feel as though everything we do requires substantial effort—a sense of accomplishment seems an elusive goal never meant to be achieved—and so we become discouraged.

Each of these experiences is a crucial aspect of career development. They provide environmental feedback regarding ways you may need to change your course, stay the course, or do a little of both. They can be indicators that help you pay attention to your experiences and respond accordingly. Unfortunately, we often ignore information provided to us, sometimes out of fear of what it might mean. For example, you could imagine that one poor test grade in an academic major or one negative work experience in which you do not perform adequately means you have made a serious mistake in choosing a particular career goal. Rather, it could simply mean you have identified an area for increased effort aimed at developing a reasonable level of competence in one aspect of your career goal. We sometimes ignore this possibility because we fear we might not be up to the challenge. Other times, the evidence may be overwhelming that a significant change of course is needed, but we often equate changing with failing and attempt to deny reality.

When we fail to pay close attention to the variety of experiences comprising our career flow, we miss opportunities to construct careers that bring a more complete sense of meaning and purpose. Thus, one of the most important skills in managing your career flow is simply paying attention. As famously declared in the play, Death of a Salesman: “Attention must be paid”—so it is, with your career. Paying attention to your experience and the feedback you get regarding your career plans will provide a useful guide in constructing future goals.

Career Flow and Self-Awareness

To create a career that flows in a satisfying way, you must pay attention to the daily “noise” you encounter and create. In this context, noise refers to the inner dialog you engage in over the course of a day. What do you tell yourself? What do you think about your situation? Becoming aware of your “self-talk” helps you gain greater self-awareness. Once you become aware of your self-talk, you will be able to identify

Self-Thoughts Journal

ACTIVITY 1.2

To gain clarity in your inner conversations, start maintaining a daily journal. Try to record at least a few thoughts each day. Begin right now by recording a few words for each of these questions:

- In what ways do you encourage yourself?
In what ways do you discourage yourself?

What positive statements do you make about yourself?

Conversely, what negative statements do you tell yourself?

In what ways do you feel you do not measure up?

What are your strengths?

What would someone who loves you say are your strengths?

Where do you find enjoyment in your activities?

What sort of activities do you prefer to avoid?

What do you hope for in your life?

What do you fear?

This task should only take a few minutes. Write down (or type) whatever comes to mind as you consider these questions. Do not judge what you record; just go with what comes to mind.

ways in which your thoughts are helpful to you and ways in which they are not helpful. The thoughts that are not helpful can be challenged, changed, and discontinued.

Now, look back over what you have written. Does anything surprise you? No doubt many things you wrote are familiar to you. Try to look at what you have written in an objective way. What makes sense to you and what does not? What is your rationale for each? Are there things you would like to change about what you wrote? Are there things you would like to develop further? What seems to be stopping you in both cases? Do you see a negative pattern you can change? For example, you may choose to decrease the amount of time you spend thinking about the faults of others
or you may choose to spend less time being critical of yourself. Similarly, is there one 
thing you would like to do more of? You may choose to say nicer things to yourself 
more often during the day, for example. Try one of these out over the course of the 
next couple of days and see how it goes. Do not judge the results as good or bad, but 
rather be like a scientist—consider the different behaviors and/or ways of thinking as if 
they were an experiment. See how the experiment goes, and then assess how you feel 
(better, worse, hopeful, discouraged, etc.). Once you have tried this experiment, you 
may find it useful to discuss your thoughts about it with a career counselor.

It is important to remember that you can learn how to respond effectively to each 
challenge your career presents to you. At times, your career will flow smoothly; 
at other times, you will experience excessive amounts of challenge leading to a sense 
of being overwhelmed with the tasks at hand. Fortunately, the ebb and flow of career 
development processes also include times when the demands confronting you will be 
minimal. Your resources far exceed the challenges you encounter. These can be times 
of renewal from recent activities and re-imagining future possibilities. You can develop 
the resources for managing each dimension of your career experience.

Tip  
All effective career decisions are grounded in self-awareness.

The Importance of Career Flow

The different dimensions of career flow shape the course of your life and help you 
tune in to what you enjoy and what you value. They represent a holistic sense of 
the human experience—excitement, boredom, confidence, anxiety, love, and hate. 
Everyone has these experiences, and they cannot be eliminated from your career 
experience. So, even though “occupational nirvanas” are nonexistent, satisfying 
careers do exist. One of the keys in constructing a satisfying career is to learn from 
the totality of your career and life experiences. Learning from all of your career 
experiences allows you to be more intentional and systematic in pursing mean-
ingful and positive career opportunities.

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the resources for managing each dimension of your career experience.
Developing these resources is perhaps more important today than in previous decades. Increasingly, workers around the world appear to be experiencing greater levels of work overload. A survey of U.S. workers indicates that 62 percent leave work feeling “overtired” and “overwhelmed” (Schwartz, 2003). The average worker in the United States now spends more than 1,800 hours per year at work. Increased work participation must come at the expense of participating in other life roles, many of which (e.g., leisure, family time) can serve as buffers against work-related stress. Chronic stress creates physiological and psychological changes and often leads to disease and depression.

Understanding the range of experiences comprising the career development experience will help you to manage your career more effectively. Knowing that your work will bring you challenges you prefer and challenges you would rather not experience will help you to keep a proper perspective related to your work. Developing the skills necessary for managing the various ways your career flows will help you become more satisfied in work and life.

Summary

Everyone’s career has both challenges and rewards. There are times when careers flow smoothly and times when they do not. Managing your career flow effectively begins with awareness. By first paying attention to your inner dialog, you begin to develop the awareness necessary for identifying what is occurring in your environment, how you are reacting to your experiences, and what you need to do to cope effectively with the tasks confronting you. You can develop strategies to cope effectively with the inevitable range of career flow experiences you will encounter.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Using the career flow concept, what advice would you offer Alice relative to her current career concerns?

2. Consider what you hope to accomplish in your career. Write down three potential goals you have for your career development.

3. Be intentional about saying three positive things about yourself over the next week. Practice this once in the morning and once in the evening. Pay attention to what this experience is like for you. Consider recording your thoughts in a journal.

4. Discuss with a classmate your reactions to “career flow.” In what ways does it make sense to you? In what ways does it not?

5. We recommend you read one or two biographies or autobiographies of people you admire. As you read these stories, try to identify the different dimensions of career flow experienced by the person you are reading about. How did she or he manage the different dimensions of career flow? What did this person manage well? What did he or she manage less effectively? When you finish your reading, write down three lessons you learned about career flow from your reading.

Reference