

Why?

A well-designed life is a life that makes sense. It's a life in which who you are, what you believe and what you do all line up together. This leaflet will help you figure out what a well-designed life looks like for you. Designers imagine things that don't exist yet, and then they build them, and the world changes. You can do this in your own life. You can imagine a career and a life that doesn't exist; you can build that future you, and as a result your life will change. Life Design is a lifelong process and so we recommend you revisit the different stages regularly.

How?

You need to learn to think like a designer. Designers don't think their way forward, they build their way forward. What this means is that you are not just going to be dreaming up a lot of fun fantasies that have no relationship to the real world – or the real you. You are going to understand yourself, build things (prototypes), try stuff and have a lot of fun in the process.

Design mindsets

Be Curious: Explore. See opportunities everywhere.

Try Stuff: No more sitting and thinking about what you are going to do. Designers try things; they test prototypes until they find something that works. They embrace change and don't get stuck on a particular outcome.

Reframe Problems: reframe dysfunctional beliefs that prevent you from finding the career and life that you want.

Know it's a process: Mistakes happen. You'll try things that don't work. It's a process, and that's OK. Learn to let go and be non-judgemental of yourself.

Ask for help: You are not alone. You do not have to design your life by yourself. Design is a collaborative process and many of the best ideas come from talking to others, more on this later.

Step 1: start where you are

Dysfunctional belief: I should already know where I'm going.

Reframe: You can't know where you are going until you know where you are.

Before you can start to think about where you are going, you need to understand where you are now. We all have problems that need solving. Often, we can get wrapped up trying to solve the wrong problems. We can also worry about 'gravity problems'. Gravity problems are ones you can't solve; gravity exists, gravity problems exist, accept it and get on with it!

For example: "Artists just don't make enough money in our culture. What do I do about it?" You can't do anything about it, so reframe the problem into one you can do something about. Your life design could include ways of making a living while leaving enough time for you to make your art.

“. . . you are not just going to be dreaming up a lot of fun fantasies that have no relationship to the real world – or the real you. You are going to understand yourself, build things (prototypes), try stuff and have a lot of fun in the process.”



Task: Complete a 'how's it going' worksheet. Be honest and don't judge yourself.

Now take a look at your gauges. Are there any that are too low/high? Are you happy with where your gauges are? Have you been honest with yourself? Do you need to act and make changes? Are any of your problems 'gravity problems'? Do this assessment on a regular basis – keeping an eye on how you are doing will help you to intervene, rebalance and sort things out before they impact in a negative way.

Sources of help:

- Staffordshire University Student Support Services
<https://www.staffs.ac.uk/student-services/>
- Sporting opportunities at the Uni
<https://www.staffs.ac.uk/student-life/sport>
- Students Union support
<https://www.staffsunion.com/advice/>

Step 2: building a compass

Dysfunctional belief: I should know where I'm going!

Reframe: I won't always know where I'm going – but I can always know whether I'm going in the right direction.

To start thinking about your direction you first need to understand your view of work and your view of life. Ideally, they should complement each other as much as possible, but if they don't and compromises are needed you can consciously plan them rather than have them forced on you.



Task: write a short reflection about your view of work

This is your definition of what good work should be. This is NOT meant to be a job description about what type of work you want, rather your motivation to, or philosophy of, work.

Things to consider:

- Why work?
- What's work for?
- What does work mean?
- How does work relate to the individual, others, society? Service to others and the world
- What defines good or worthwhile work?
- What does money have to do with it? Money social standing standard of living
- What do experience, growth and fulfilment have to do with it? – learning and growth



Task: write a short reflection on your view of life

Your view of life describes what matters to you the most, your ideas about the world and how it works. What gives life meaning? What makes your life worthwhile or valuable? How does your life relate to others in your family, your community and the world? What do money, fame, and personal accomplishment have to do with a satisfying life? How important are experience, growth and fulfilment in your life?

Things to consider:

- Why are we here?
- What is the meaning or purpose of life?
- What is the relationship between the individual and others?
- Where do family, country, and the rest of the world fit in?
- What impact does faith have on your life?
- How do you define success?
- Is learning important to you?



Task: finding your "true north"

Now it's time to pull it all together. Reread your view of work and your view of life and answer the following questions:

- Where do your views on work and life complement one another?
- Where do they clash?
- Does one drive the other? How?

You might find you revisit your work or life view and amend them while you do this. It can be helpful to review your life and work views on a regular basis, especially if you start to feel that your life is not working or you're going through a transition.

Step 3: finding your way

Dysfunctional belief: Work is not supposed to be enjoyable; that's why they call it work.

Reframe: Enjoyment is a guide to finding the right work for you.

Often, we have so many thoughts, preconceived ideas and other people's opinions in our heads about how we ought to live our lives that we can't see the wood for the trees. We feel we 'should' be doing certain things because our peers are, or because we are told by others to do so. Following this route can often leave us into jobs and lives that don't satisfy us or, worse, make us miserable. Work is fun when we are using our strengths and are deeply engaged and energised by what we are doing. So, for now, let's put all that baggage to one side and look at what engages you and what energises you by keeping an engagement journal.

What do we mean by engagement?

In life design we think of three different levels of engagement:

- Disengaged: bored, restless, unhappy
- Engaged: excited, focused, having a good time
- Flow: total engagement/being 'in the zone' – when you're so engaged with something time either seems to stop or it seems to fly by. It's playtime for adults. A really rewarding and satisfying career involves lots of 'flow'.

Energy

We engage in physical and mental activities all the time. Some of these activities give us energy and some drain it. Once you have an idea where your energy goes you can start to redesign your activities to maximise your vitality and bear this in mind when planning your career/life.



Task: Your Engagement Journal

- Complete a log of your daily activities, using the worksheet provided or using your own method. Use gauges to measure how engaged and energised you are while doing these activities. Try to do this daily or, at the very least, every couple of days.
- Continue this logging for at least three weeks.
- At the end of each week, jot down your reflections – notice which activities are engaging and energising and which ones are not.
- Are there any surprises in your reflections?
- Zooming in – once you've got used to logging your activities you can start to look in more detail at what you were doing.
- **For example:** You might have reflected that a lecture you attended really engaged and energised you. Zoom in and try and work out what it was, in particular, that raised your energy levels. Was it the lecturer, a particular topic, your participation in the lecture, the way the lecture was delivered, workshop activities . . .?

A day is made up of lots of 'moments' some of which are great and some of which are rubbish and the rest are somewhere in between. Your task is to start recognising how you feel and what you are doing when you feel good and bad.

Reflection Tip

If you find the reflection difficult, here are some questions to help you:

- **Activities:** What were you actually doing? Did you have a specific role to play or were you a participant?
- **Environments:** Notice where you were when you were involved in the activity. What kind of a place was it, and how did it make you feel?
- **Interactions:** What were you interacting with – people or machines? Was it a new interaction or a familiar one? Was it formal or informal?
- **Objects:** Were you interacting with any objects or devices?
- **Users:** Who else was there and what role did they play in the experience being either positive or negative?



Task: Peak experiences from the past

Looking at your past (it doesn't matter how long ago) can also be really useful – although only if you are happy to do this. Take some time to reflect on your memories of your past peak experiences and write an Engagement Journal entry to see what you can find out. Use the engagement and energy gauges to help.

Step 4: generating ideas

Dysfunctional Belief: I have to find the one right idea.

Reframe: I need a lot of ideas so that I can explore any number of possibilities for my future.

Believing there is just one career for you leads to a lot of stress and indecision. Actually, we all have many career pathways within us, leading to numerous amazing lives. Which is a much more liberating and less stressful way of looking at things – if things don't work out with one choice, you can try one of your other ideas. Designers learn to have lots of ideas – the crazier the better - and they understand that the number one enemy of creativity is judgement. In this section we will show you techniques you can use to generate your own ideas and we recommend that you put your inner critic to one side and let your ideas out.

You need to bear the following in mind as part of this process:

1. You choose better when you have lots of good ideas to choose from.
2. Never choose your first solution to any problem.

Mind mapping

Mind mapping is visual and helps you literally make connections. The process has three steps:

1. Pick a topic
2. Make the mind map
3. Make secondary connections



Task: Create Mind Maps

You are now going to create three different mind maps, each one consisting of three or four layers, with at least a dozen or more elements in the outermost ring. The point of the exercise is to generate lots of ideas – not a specific result. It's about moving from 'what do I do next?' to a designer's 'what can I imagine?'. Use as big a piece of paper as you can and set a time limit of a 3-5 minutes to avoid thinking too much or allowing your inner critic to get involved.

Keep going with your mind map until you run out of ideas/time – using the instructions below, and example on Worksheet 3, as a guide.

- **Centre:** Pick a word or phrase for the centre of the mind map (see instructions below).

- First ring: Draw five or six lines from the centre and then write down five or six things related to that idea – write down the first words that come to mind.
- Second ring: Now repeat this process. Look at the words in the first ring and draw lines from them and free associate new words related to these prompts. These words don't have to associate with the centre concept.
- Third ring: Repeat this process, looking at the words in the second ring.
- Fourth ring: As above, for the third ring.

Stage 1

Map 1 – Engagement

- From your Engagement Journal, pick one of the areas of most interest to you – when you were really engaged – and make it the centre of the map.

Map 2 – Energy

- From your Engagement Journal, pick something that really energised you and use this as the centre of your mind map

Map 3 – Flow

- From your Engagement Journal, pick an experience when you were in a state of flow. Put the experience at the centre of your final mind map

Stage 2

- Look at the outer ring of one of your maps and pick three items that jump out at you.
- Now try to combine those three items into a possible job description that would be fun and interesting to you and would be helpful to someone else.
- Name your role. To make it seem more real you could even draw a quick sketch of it or create a collage about it.
- Now do the same with the other two maps.

Step 5: design your lives

Dysfunctional belief: I need to figure out my best possible life, make a plan, and then execute it.

Reframe: There are multiple great lives (and plans) within me, and I get to choose which one to build my way forward to next.



Task: Create three Life Plans

You are now going to create three very different Life Plans for the next five years of your life using the worksheet provided. Make at least one of them as far-fetched and crazy as you can.

- Life One – the plan you already have. Your first plan is centred on what you've already got in mind.
- Life Two – imagine that Life One is not possible and think of something else you could do.
- Life Three – the thing you'd do if money and time were no object.

Create these three alternative versions of the next five years using Worksheet 4 and include:

- A visual/graphical timeline. Include personal and non-career events as well – do you want to get married, train to run a marathon, travel the world?
- Give each option a title in the form of a six-word headline.
- What kind of things will you want to test and explore in each alternative version of your life?

Create a dashboard with four gauges to measure:

- Resources – do you have the time, money, skill and contacts to pull off the plan?
- Likability – are you hot, cold or warm about your plan?
- Confidence – are you feeling full of confidence, or uncertainty about pulling this off?
- Coherence – is the plan consistent with you, your View of Life and your View of Work?

Things to consider:

- Where will you live?
- What experience/learning will you gain?
- What are the impacts/results of choosing this alternative?
- What will life look like? What particular role, industry, or company do you see yourself in?

Share these versions of you

It can be really helpful to talk through your plans with a trusted friend/s. This trusted friend must be one you can rely on to not be judgemental. You are not asking them to review your ideas, just listen to them and contribute their own thoughts/ideas. The Career Coaches in the Careers Studio are wonderful at helping with this.

Step 6: prototyping

Dysfunctional belief: If I comprehensively research and create a detailed plan I'll get the career I want.

Reframe: I should ask questions and get experience (prototype) to help me to understand if my plan is the right one for me.

When working on a design brief, designers make lots of prototypes to see what works. In life design terms prototyping is all about asking good questions and

getting experience to help you to learn more and to challenge our own assumptions. Creating new experiences through prototyping will give you an opportunity to understand what a career path might feel like and decide if it's really for you. It will help you to start building a professional network and be open to unexpected opportunities. Prototypes also help you to try and fail in a safe environment. Prototyping isn't about sitting and thinking, it's about doing – your decisions are then made based on physical experience in the real world.

Life design conversations

A Life Design Conversation is really simple. Its main aim is to get someone's story – someone who is doing what you are thinking of doing or who has experience and expertise in this area. The story you want is their personal story – how did they get there and what is it like to do it. You are not asking for a job and it's not an interview – they should be doing the talking not you.

Things you could ask include:

1. How did you get into this career?
2. What is really like to do this job?
3. What are the good and bad things?
4. What do your days look like?

Life design experiences

Conversations are great and you can learn a lot from them. But you need to experience 'what it's like' for yourself by either watching others do it or, even better, doing some form of experience yourself. This could involve spending a day shadowing a professional, or voluntary work, or short term or long-term work experience placement or getting a part time or summer job in the field, but in a lower level role.



Task: generating life design conversation and experience ideas

Look back at the three life plans you created in 'Design your lives' and the questions you wrote for each one and:

1. Make a list of life design conversations that might help you answer these questions.
2. Make a list of prototype experiences that might help answer these questions.
3. If you are stuck, have a brainstorming session with trusted friends or a Career Coach to generate more ideas or create a mind map if you prefer to work alone.
4. Do it! - start to actively seek out life design conversations and experiences. LinkedIn is a great resource for this.
5. Keep notes and reflect on your conversations and experiences. Adapt your thinking and choices based on what you have learned. Don't be fixed in your thinking, be flexible. Accept when things

didn't turn out how you thought and be prepared to think of new ideas and have another go.

How to brainstorm

Brainstorming with others is a great technique to help you generate lots of ideas you wouldn't have thought of on your own – you could ask trusted friends or work with a Career Coach. Brainstorm what you'd like to know more about when having life design conversations and how you could get life design experience – ask 'how many ways can I/we think of to . . .'. The aim here is to generate lots and lots of ideas and not to judge them – just let your imagination flow.

The rules of brainstorming:

1. Go for quantity, not quality
2. Don't be judgemental or censor ideas – nothing is too silly
3. Work with others if you can and build off their ideas
4. Encourage wild ideas

Reflect on the brainstorm:

Group similar ideas together into different categories and then start thinking about which one/s excite you the most.

The benefits of Life Design Conversations and Experiences: Accessing the hidden job market

Dysfunctional Belief: My dream job is out there waiting.

Reframe: You design your dream job through a process of actively seeking and co-creating it.

Reality check: There are no such things as dream jobs. There are lots of interesting jobs in worthwhile organisations populated by dedicated and hardworking people trying to do honest work. There are good jobs in good places with good co-workers and there are good jobs that you can make close to perfect so you can really love them. Those are the 'dream jobs' you want to find – but almost all of them are invisible to you now, because they are part of the hidden job market. It's estimated that as many as 80% of jobs are never advertised, rather they are recruited by word of mouth, referral, internally or via head hunting.

The secret: The hidden job market is the job market that's only open to people who are already connected into the web of professional relationships in which the job resides. It's almost impossible to get into this market as a job seeker. However, it is possible to get on the inside as a genuinely interested inquirer –

someone looking for the story (not a job). So, in other words, someone who is having life design conversations and getting life design experiences! By talking to professionals in your field of experience as someone interested in finding out more, you will be building your network of contacts in the field. The contact, if you make a good impression, will remember you, add you to their list of potential applicants and get in touch when they have something for you. That's how the hidden job market works.

Often the person you are speaking to, or getting experience with, will do the work for you and ask you if you would consider working for an organisation like theirs. However, sometimes they need a little prompt like: "The more I learn about your organisation the more interesting it becomes. I wonder what steps would be involved in finding out how someone like me might become a part of your organisation?" This is an open-ended question and invites possibilities, including potential referrals to other professionals/organisations. DON'T ask "Do you have any jobs?" because that will most likely get a 'no', 'don't know', 'check our job listings' type response and close the conversation down.

Step 7: making choices

At some point you will need to start making some career decisions. It may be, that while you have worked through the life design process so far, you have discovered your career path. However, you may have reached this point with lots of options and need to narrow them down a bit. Most minds can only choose effectively between three to five options – any more than that and we are overwhelmed – so you definitely don't want to have more choices than that.

 **Task:** narrow down your list of options

- Look at your idea generation, research, reflections on conversations and experiences and write down your list of options.
- Group similar options together and then pick just one from the group to keep on the list.
- Now, go through the list and start crossing off options until you have three left. If you cross an option off and instantly feel regret, then reinstate it and remove another in its place.
- If you are having difficulty crossing options off your list you might want to use a prioritising grid, see the separate worksheet. Pick the top three choices.

Bibliography:

Life Design. Bill Burnett & Dave Evans
What Color Is Your Parachute? Richard Nelson Bolles

How can I get further support?

You can receive peer to peer career support from our Career Coaches via our Digital Career Studio.

To get in touch you can:

- Email careers@staffs.ac.uk
- Telephone 01782 294991
- Or ask a question on our online chat at www.staffs.ac.uk/careers.

Other leaflets in this series:

Life after university

Graduate job hunting

Work experience

Available online at www.staffs.ac.uk
or from the Career Studio