

## CHAPTER 7

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# Learning

## Learning How to Learn

In my early twenties, I studied abroad in Italy. I had studied Italian in college in part because I loved the way the language sounds. On my first day in Italy, I saw an older man sitting in the town's piazza with a cute, scraggly dog. I was living my best Italian life for one single day and I wanted to talk to him. So, I strung together a sentence in Italian and worked up the confidence to speak.

I walked over to him, smiled my big American smile and told him proudly, "*Mi piace la tua carne,*" thinking that I'd just told him that I liked his dog. Unfortunately, I had mixed up the words *il cane*, for "dog," and *la carne*, for "meat." So, I told the old man I liked his meat. He looked confused and I quickly moved along. It was embarrassing. But that's how language learning works. The entire process involves throwing out a bunch of quasi-mangled words on your path to fluency. There is no other way to do it. Mistakes will be made. But that's how you learn.

I still love foreign languages. Whenever I tell someone I'm interested in learning a new language, they're quick to say that it's hard to learn a language as an adult. They follow it up by saying it's easier to learn it when you're younger. You've likely experienced this if you've ever dreamed out loud about trying to speak another language.

While it's definitely harder to learn a language as an adult, there's so much joy in learning another language at any age. It's fun to connect with someone in their language. Years after my experience in Italy, I lived in Germany for several months. I couldn't string together meaningful sentences in German, so I learned how to say the phrase "I'm the lifeguard." I wanted to say something so ridiculous and so confidently that I could get a German person's attention. It worked. Whenever I said it, I got a laugh. Often, they'd teach me something else to say, and I'd learn some more words. I made friends this way.

Learning a new language is hard. Learning how to play an instrument is hard. Learning to code is hard. Learning to speak in public is hard. Learning to write is hard. Learning to get feedback on your writing is hard.

The key thread here is that learning is hard, full stop. There's no getting around that. But learning is also playful, fun, and motivating. Even more, there is joy in learning. It feels damn good to *get it*. It's lovely to look at your progress, assess what you've learned and declare, fuck yes, I know more than what I knew two weeks ago.

Changing careers is full of learning. If you're out of the habit of learning new things, it might feel a bit odd to start learning again. You might feel stiff or dumb. That's okay. Everyone starts at the beginning when they're learning something new.

## The learning party that never stops

In 2017, the *New York Times* wrote about the rise in people who are in their sunset years— 60 to 80 years old—learning to code. They profiled Ms. McKerrow, an 84-year-old who learned to code online. Helped by her grandson, she learned to code and uses her newly found tech skills to “create personalized, all-singing-and-dancing online birthday cards.”<sup>43</sup>

What an absolute delight. I loved this story so much because it flies in the face of so much of what we tell ourselves about learning new skills. Too often we talk ourselves out of learning new things and make the excuse that we’re too old to learn. It’s not true, of course. You aren’t too old to try to learn something new. When we say we’re too old what we’re really saying is, “I’m scared to try.”

If you’ve been away from learning experiences for a while, taking on a new learning experience might seem intimidating. Traditional learning experiences have saddled us with memories of homework, bad grades, and writing papers at the last moment. These negative experiences tend to erase all the good moments. They make us forget the times when we understood a new concept so well that we could explain it to others who needed our help. The good news about learning as an adult is that grades don’t matter. You can get a C in a subject, pass a course, and still get hired into a new job that pays you more than you made before.

Our culture makes trying out something new and learning a new skill as an adult seem far more high stakes than it actually is. The learning process is not high stakes. There is no requirement to be the best when you’re learning. You simply need to

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<sup>43</sup>*New York Times*, “Code.”

show up and learn. Then you need to apply your new knowledge and your skills to something practical, so you have something to show from your learning experience.

As you customize your career and transition into an agile worker, you must integrate new learning experiences into your professional life. Lifelong learning and upskilling are the new normal. Lifelong learning is the act of consistently reflecting on your professional experience, managing your professional development, and taking advantage of opportunities to learn new skills.

Being a lifelong learner doesn't mean you need to be a student forever. Instead, it's simply seeking out opportunities, big and small, to learn new things. It's embracing your curiosity and seeking out learning experiences to enrich your professional experience.

## **Choose your own learning experience**

As an adult, time and money are the biggest barriers to learning. Squeezing in a learning experience when work, family, and relationships demand our attention is a pain in the ass. Yet learning is the foundation of a career change. To transition into a new career, you have to elevate learning as a priority in your life.

As a career-changer, you need to pick a learning experience that fits both your lifestyle and learning style. Learning experiences are not limited to traditional classroom settings. Our generation has more access to learning opportunities and new knowledge than any prior generation. We can choose learning experiences in university classrooms, online courses, YouTube videos, mentorship, or DIY learning adventures. The opportunities to learn are endless.

Learning experiences take many different shapes, both formal and informal. Traditional career advice has driven the narrative that career changes happen through university degree programs. Bachelor's and master's degrees are paths to career transitions, but they are not the only path. They work for many people, but not all. Thankfully, you don't have to go back to school for a professional degree to make a career change. You could opt for an online certificate or create your own learning experiences if you're good at self-motivation. Your choice depends on your learning style and needs.

I struggle a lot with online learning because I like to learn with people. I prefer to be surrounded by others who are going through the process with me. Online discussion boards do not inspire me. College classrooms are amazing for that. But I also can't afford to go tens of thousands of dollars further into debt for my love of classroom discussion. I'm upskilling this time by learning Python through an online tech degree program. But I didn't just pick any online program. I searched for an online learning experience that actually offers a lively online support community and an engaging learning experience. It was hard to find, but I found the one that matches my learning style and lifestyle. The other day, I read a piece of code for the first time. I finally understood it. I felt joy.

## **Lifestyle learning experiences**

Just like your career path should match your life needs, the learning experience you choose should match your life right now. If you can't take two years off of work to go back to school and into debt, then don't do it. If you can, make sure that learning

experience will provide the outcomes you need in order to make a successful career transition.

In the next chapters, I take you through the various types of learning experiences that will help you upskill in your career change. In a career change, you aren't learning for the sake of learning. You're learning to complete a transition. To move forward in your career, you need to tie your learning experiences to your desired outcome.

You picked up this book so you could learn how to change careers. That's a good first step. But learning how to change careers isn't as simple as reading this book. You have to apply what you learn in here and practice it. Learning new skills by reading a book is like trying to learn to surf from reading a website. You can have all the knowledge, but the minute you step out there you're going to crash. It's perfectly okay to crash. But you can't quit. You have to pick your soggy-ass self up and start again. You have to take everything you learn AND throw yourself out there AND crash AND do it all over again without being the best. That's the learning process.

I'm asking you to do exactly that in this book. I want you to keep reading. But I'm about to ask you to do a lot more than just read. I'm asking you to learn by doing.

To prepare you for taking action beyond this book, I have just the exercise for you.

**EXERCISE: Dance It Out**

Seven years ago, I took a tango class. The reason was simple: Tango is hot and I wanted to be hot, so I signed up. I thought that after my six weeks of tango sessions I'd basically be just like Salma Hayek doing the tango in that scene from *Frida*.

I was wrong. I also had no idea what I was getting into. Learning tango meant getting intimate with strangers who were just as awkward as I was. You start chest to chest with a stranger. You're so up close and personal that the teacher gives a thorough talk on the importance of personal hygiene. The problem was that I'm really uncomfortable touching strangers. I'm not even a hugger. To find out my dream dance class involves taking cues while intimately chest to chest with a stranger was a painfully awkward experience for me. I wanted to run out of the class every time I showed up.

Unless you're a dancer, chances are dancing is awkward for you. Which is why this is the perfect exercise to kick off your learning.

I want you to take a dance class if you are able. It doesn't have to be expensive. Try one of the free ones at your community center. Drop into a bar that has free salsa lessons. Or just go to Zumba if you've never tried it before.

You might be wondering what dance has to do with career changes. It has everything to do with career changes because, in order to change, you have to take the first step: commit to learning when it feels awkward.

I want you to dance it out. You must take instruction. You must move like the instructor tells you. You must make

mistakes and not dwell on mistakes. The hardest part: find joy in the process. After you complete the dance class, reflect on the following questions.

- What did you learn?
- What made you commit to this dance class?
- How did you make time for this?
- What brought you joy?

It's time to pick your dance class and get busy building your learning muscles.



## Create an Experience Inventory

Understanding your work experience is a critical part of making a career transition. Before you explore which learning experiences will get you closer to your career goal, you need to understand what you already bring to the table. Your previous job titles have no reflection on your actual skill sets. No matter if you waited tables for the last four years, wrote emails all day, or entered data into a spreadsheet, you have skills. You need to get to know them. The first step to getting to know them is examining your work experience.

But first, I'd like to take this time to apologize on behalf of the entire HR industry for the bullshit résumé angst we have caused you throughout your career. Writing a résumé doesn't build your skills or help you understand your professional self. Instead, it forces you to condense your entire professional life into a cramped space, using language you'd never use in the real world. You spend hours creating a document that a recruiter will spend 10 seconds reviewing, if you get a human to review it at all.

So, ignore your résumé. Instead, create an experience inventory. An experience inventory is a list of all your jobs with a simple description of what you did in each role. The goal is to get a big-picture view of your work, free from the formal shackles of a résumé.

Your professional past is just as important as the future. With each job you take, you stack new skills on existing skills. Often, you'll find experiences in your past work that align with your future career goals.

## EXERCISE: Create Your Inventory

An experience inventory is a summary of all your work in an informal list. Start by making a list of all your previous jobs. All work counts. Side hustles, volunteering, raising a family, and jobs-to-pay the bills all count as work. Use normal language. Don't include the company name. Instead, describe the type of organization you worked for. Include years, not months, to keep yourself organized. Note whether the work is contract, part-time, self-employed, or full-time.

Use a notebook or your computer but make sure you can edit. You're going to add more to this after the first round.

Below is a slice of my experience inventory as an example.

### *Experience Inventory*

- 2008 (Contract Job) Long-term contract work as an administrative assistant at an insurance company
- 2009 Remote business development, sales, and social media marketing for an international education tech startup
- 2010 Program management for university global MBA programs at a business school
- 2012 Travel writing and digital marketing/content specialist for a luxury private jet travel company

- 2014 Coached and developed career workshops for international MBA students, alumni, and executives
- 2017 Launched online school, designed online courses, taught career workshops
- 2018 Designed conversations for chatbots and analyzed conversational data

When you're done, circle the jobs you like. Strike through the ones you never want to work in again. Then reflect. What did you learn from each of these jobs?

Your experience inventory is proof of your experience and knowledge. You don't lose these things when you jump careers. You bring them with you. Examining and acknowledging them ensures you don't forget what you're capable of as you move forward. Plus, you never know when your experience from the past might help you with a new opportunity in the future.

## Identify Your Skill Gap

Changing careers is like jumping into a new culture. There's a new language to learn. There are new discoveries to be made. And you feel pretty dumb as you make your way through all of it.

Feeling dumb is a normal part of a career change. Jumping into a new work world is a learning experience. Part of that experience is understanding the skills needed to succeed in the career you want. Skills are currency in the new world of work. The better you understand how your skills shape your career, the more agile you'll be.

When people ask us what we do, we share our job titles. Job titles are a tidy way of communicating all the things we do in a job. They make it easier to talk about our work. If you asked a project manager what they do and they replied, "Well, I organize projects, set deadlines, wrangle people, save money, create budgets, please stakeholders, and communicate results to management," you'd fall over in boredom. Nobody wants to hear that. So, we package it up into job titles to make everyone's life easier.

Many of us are walking around with job titles that don't make sense to anyone outside of our industry. In my last job as an MBA career coach, my title was Associate Director of Career Services. That tells you nothing about my abilities to deliver creative workshops and engage audiences of all sizes. Yet that's one of my top skills.

Relying on tidy packages to explain our work makes it harder to know what we actually do in a job. We lack the language to speak about our skills. To change careers, you must be fluent in the language of skills.

## Take a skill inventory

Skills are simply the ability to do a specific task. In the context of your daily job, you use skills daily to get your job done and keep your boss happy. As a career-changer, you need to get to know your skills.

The first job you take in your new career is a destination job. To make the jump into a destination job, identify which skills you have and which skills are required for the destination job. Then note the skills you're missing. The missing skills are your skills gap. Once you know your skills gap, you'll choose a learning experience to develop the missing skills and land the destination job.

To find your skill gap, start with two lists. First, make a skill inventory. A skill inventory is simply a list of all your skills from previous jobs. Think about your previous jobs and all the tools you've used to get a job or project done. In your professional history, you've likely used a combination of technical skills and Power Skills. For example, if you work as a project manager, your skills might be: writing, managing people, building budgets, developing processes for project management software, PowerPoint, and more. The goal of creating a skill inventory is to see all your skills. This is not a time to be humble. Write down every skill you use, even if you've only used it once.

Next, build a destination skills list. Destination skills are the skills needed to qualify for the destination job. Read job descriptions for your destination jobs to identify the destination skills. Job descriptions are a company's wish list of skills. Since job descriptions differ tremendously, translate them into the skills necessary to do the job.

When you have the two lists, identify which skills are missing from your skill inventory that qualify you for the destination job. The missing skills are your skill gap.

I want you to focus on identifying all your skills, no matter if you are good at them or not. For example, I'm really good at public speaking. I am not good at budgets. I have never worked with financial models. However, I have *the ability* to make a budget and I've done it several times. That's a useful skill to have if I'm transitioning into a job that requires me to work with numbers. If my destination job is a climate change analyst, I need to remember that I have worked with numbers before. It is not a brand-new skill. However, I have not created a financial model, so that would not go in my skill inventory. But, if the destination job requires that I make financial models, I would note that my lack of financial modeling is part of my skill gap. That means I'll need to make sure my learning experience includes learning financial modeling.

A career change is a strategic move. Your goal is to get a new job in a new professional path that improves your professional life. Your skill gap informs your learning experience choices. When you know which skills you are missing, you can make a plan to learn them. It ensures you select an upskilling path that teaches you the skills you need to put you on your new career path.

Once you've identified your skills gap, it's time to go shopping for your new skills.

## EXERCISE: Identify Your Skills

Agile workers speak the language of skills. If you're new to looking at your work through the lens of skills, now is a good time to learn how.

Identifying your skills is like a scavenger hunt. You figure out which skills you have through a combination of reflection; conversations with coworkers; and the old standby, Google.

Start the process by revisiting your experience inventory. Review each job on your inventory list. Think about your work and tasks to get the job done. If you have a copy of old job descriptions and the résumé you submitted for the job, use them to jog your memory.

Then create a skill inventory. Reflect on the questions:

- What projects did you work on?
- What skills helped you get the work done daily?
- What software or tools did you use on a regular basis?
- What feedback from coworkers or managers have you received about your abilities?

Write down five skills that you used in each job. If you are stuck on this part, talk to former coworkers or bosses. Ask them what they think you did well. If you're still stuck, Google is there for you. There is no shortage of video explanations, skill lists, and niche websites that go into detail about the skills needed for different jobs. This final list will be your skill inventory.

Once you have a skill inventory, make a second list. On this list, write down everything that you're really good at.

Like, so good that people are always impressed. Don't be modest. Talk yourself up. This is also excellent practice for your future destination job search.

Then, circle what you love doing. When you change careers, you don't leave all your skills behind. You bring them with you. In our new world of work, employers want employees with cross-functional skills. When you know what you are able to do, you'll find more opportunities to apply your skills inside an organization. It will open up new opportunities and get you more money in the future.



## Choose Your Upskill Path

Now that you speak the language of skills, it's time to figure out how to get new skills. The next section takes you through the process of evaluating different learning experiences.

There is no single path to upskilling. Traditional career advice has taught us that college degrees are the way to change careers. While college degrees offer benefits, it is not the only way to upskill. There are technical programs often offered by community colleges and apprenticeships, that teach practical skills. Careers in electrical and solar installation are lucrative career paths with a solid foundation that you don't need a college degree for. More recently, bootcamps have emerged to also serve that need. You don't need a college degree to learn to code or build a user interface for a company's app.

Remember, upskilling is the pursuit of formal and informal learning experiences to learn new skills and upgrade your career. Once you've identified where you'd like to go in your next career move, you need an upskill solution that gets you to your goal. It could be a formal college degree program. Or it could be a combination of DIY learning options and short online courses offered through your current employer. The path you choose depends on your lifestyle, financial situation, and career goals.

As you explore the options, think about how you can apply the skills and knowledge that you learn in your current job. No matter how you feel about your current place of work, they are places to apply your new knowledge and skills. When you make the jump into a new career, employers will ask for examples of how you applied your new skills. Anticipate this by finding ways to apply new skills before the job search begins. Think of it like playing

with new skills. Investigate the ways you might be able to experiment within your place of work before you leave it completely.

Before you explore the upskill options, reflect on the following questions.

- What subjects interest you and what would you like to learn?
- What do you want to gain out of your learning experiences?
- How do you want to apply the new knowledge and skills that you learn?

## University Degree Programs

University degree programs—both at the bachelor’s and master’s degree level—are a familiar path to a career change. In this section, I’m referring to traditional university degree programs completed on campus, not online (the online section comes next!). University college degrees come in all shapes and sizes. If you can afford to take on the debt or have the financial support to sustain yourself while in school, a college degree is a strong option for upskilling. The key for career-changers is to choose a program where you’ll graduate with practical skills in addition to domain knowledge.

### How a college degree helps career-changers

Here’s the brutal truth about the American job market. There are two types of jobs: primary market jobs and secondary market jobs. Primary market jobs are the jobs that pay well; have a relatively stable schedule; and offer health benefits, the promise of upward mobility, and some career security.

Secondary market jobs are the opposite of all that. They are the temporary jobs, which are low-paying, offer no benefits, and rarely offer career progress.

A college degree is still the most common way to move from the secondary market to the primary market. Over the years, employers have engaged in a practice known as degree creep—requiring degrees for jobs that previously didn’t require a college degree. While that’s starting to change, not having a bachelor’s degree is a barrier to the primary job market for many Americans.

By 2020, 35 percent of job openings will require at least a bachelor's degree.<sup>44</sup>

A bachelor's degree is useful for anyone who needs to jump from the secondary market into primary market jobs. For those looking at a master's degree as an upskill path, your career outcomes will depend on the profession.

An MBA is still the most popular master's degree. That's in part because MBAs are designed specifically for career-changers. Over 70 percent of MBA students are career-changers. Education is the second most popular, no doubt due to our need for teachers. The third most popular master's degree is in healthcare, as healthcare practitioners are required to follow a standardized curriculum to obtain their license to practice.

All three of these master's degrees map to established career paths. Outside of these subjects, however, career outcomes at the master's degree level are hit and miss. Even law degrees are suffering from an abundance of lawyers and not enough law jobs. Law graduates frequently take jobs outside of law and complain about overspending to get a law degree.

If your path to reskill is through a university degree program, choose a degree program that demonstrates the ways it improves students' professional lives after graduation.

## **How to make a new degree work for your career change**

University degree programs have plenty to offer the curious learner. There is much joy in learning a new subject in a university setting.

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<sup>44</sup>Georgetown University, "Recovery."

For career-changers, the purpose of a degree is to improve your professional situation. The biggest critique against pursuing degree programs is the number of degree programs that are not aligned with the job market needs. Pay close attention to a degree program's outcomes to make sure it's the right fit for your professional goals.

As you evaluate the programs, reflect on how you might use the degree. Ask yourself these questions:

- What will you gain from the degree?
- How will the degree program improve your access to career paths that better fit your interests?
- How much will your first job after graduation increase your current salary?
- How will this degree program improve your professional life?
- How much of your estimated monthly salary after graduation will be spent paying back your student loans?
- How will you apply the skills you are learning in class in the workplace?
- What projects will you participate in to build new skills and gain experience while in school?

If you choose the degree path, pay close attention to the job you get after you graduate. Inside Higher Ed recently reported that a study by Burning Glass Technologies found that “Bachelor’s degree graduates whose first job does not require a bachelor’s degree (which is how the study defines the underemployed) are significantly likelier than those whose first job did require such a degree to still be underemployed five years later.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Inside Higher Ed, “First Job.”

Worse, the underemployment trend continues past five years, with some workers staying up to 10 years after college.

The job you land after college has an impact on your future career outcomes. Ask admissions representatives what career paths students take after graduation and the average starting salary. Some schools provide this data. Others do not. Choose programs that are transparent about their students' career outcomes.

As you evaluate a degree program, look for opportunities to build and apply hard skills. For example, the University of Utah recently launched a program called Degree Plus. It's an eight-week series with classes on data analysis, web design, and digital marketing. While this should be part of a college degree, not an add-on, these are the practical skills to look for in a degree program.

Lastly, choose a degree program that has a strong practical component. Make sure you have opportunities to apply your classroom learnings. Look for internship opportunities with local companies, courses where you consult with local companies on projects, and any opportunity to create something to show employers at the end of your program. Take advantage of opportunities to lead, create, and collaborate in your program to build your soft skills as you progress through the degree.

## **Be skeptical about for-profit colleges**

For-profit colleges have a poor record when it comes to career outcomes. Recently, Corinthian Colleges was fined \$30 million for lying about job placement outcomes. It later closed, but there are plenty of other for-profit colleges that sell expensive degrees wrapped in false promises of career success. For-profit degrees

aren't consistently valued by employers and some institutions have made false claims about their job placement rates.

Avoid for-profit colleges that offer generic degrees in business, education, or healthcare. All of these career paths are available at community colleges for much, much cheaper. Plus, community colleges will not pressure you into enrolling. If the for-profit institution can't show you where their graduates are working or the average salary of their graduates, they are likely overstating the value of their degree.

An easy way to know if you're engaging with a for-profit college is through their sales tactics. For-profit college programs use high-pressure tactics to get you to sign up quickly. Sometimes they use emotionally exploitative sales tactics to convince you that if you don't sign up right way, you're failing yourself.

If a for-profit college degree program interests you, ask to talk to alumni about their experience finding a job, their debt, and how their degree prepared them for their new career.

## **An option for the truly adventurous**

Pursuing a degree program outside the US is a smart option for those looking to save money and diversify their experience. Over the past decade, countries have built English degree programs to internationalize their universities. There are plenty of degree programs open to Americans who want to live and learn abroad.

I completed my master's degree in Denmark on a Danish government scholarship. My tuition was free and I received a monthly stipend. Several countries offer free tuition—Germany is one of them. Many others like France, Sweden, and Scotland offer English language degree programs that are cheaper than

what you'll find in the US. Most employers will not care where you received a degree (unless you're pursuing law or medicine, then there are rules).

Choosing this option is the ultimate adventure. You'll learn alongside people from different parts of the world and experience different educational models. More importantly, you'll experience so many new possibilities that you won't get by staying in the US. And, if you want to work in another country after graduation, a degree in your target country is the way to go.

## Online Learning

Online degrees and courses are expanding rapidly as an alternative to traditional, campus-based university degree programs. The obvious advantage of online learning experiences is flexibility: you get the freedom to learn from anywhere. As a career-changer, you have access to stand-alone courses, degree programs, and learning communities at a fraction of the cost of a traditional university education. You don't even have to put on pants to learn all the things.

With so much choice, it's easy to fall into analysis paralysis. So, let's break this down. The online learning paths that matter most for career-changers: online degrees, skill-based programs, and stand-alone courses.

### Online degrees

Universities have expanded and improved their online degrees in the past decade. Additionally, online learning platforms like



Coursera and edX also offer online degrees in collaboration with universities like Harvard, MIT, Columbia, and more. If you want a university degree but can't take the time off work, online degrees are ideal. In most cases, an online degree is more affordable than a campus-based degree.

Coursera partners with universities to offer affordable degree options. For example, an online MBA from the University of Illinois offered through Coursera is about \$22,000. The same MBA program on campus costs \$57,618. While the online option through Coursera isn't cheap, you're still eligible for financial aid through the online option.

Western Governors University is an innovative online learning model in a category of its own. This organization gets a special mention here, as it's a fully accredited, nonprofit university that operates entirely online (read: not a shady for-profit institution that'll leave you in debt with a worthless online degree). You'll get quality instruction designed for online learners because their university is built for online learners. The average cost of a bachelor's degree from Western Governors University is \$15,000. According to their website, the average student loan debt of WGU graduates in 2017 was less than half the national average.

## **Skill-based programs**

An alternative to a fully online degree program is a short-term, online skill-building program. These are online programs that build digital skills to help you level up in your career. They take less time to complete than a fully online degree and place a focus on learning the digital skills that give you greater flexibility in your career.

The terminology for these programs varies depending on the company. The online learning platform, Treehouse Learning, calls them Tech degrees, while Skillcrush calls them Career Blueprints. Udacity calls them Nano Degrees. While these programs are not degrees in the traditional sense—they're not offered by an accredited institution—they offer packages of courses that are ideal for career-changers.

Skillcrush is an online school that offers three-month digital skills training courses with a money-back guarantee. You can upskill into in-demand careers like visual design, user experience (UX), and front-end development. Each student completes a project and a portfolio, so they have tangible proof of their new skills.

Udacity's Nano Degrees are similar in that students build projects and portfolios. Udacity's programs are measured into weeks, so you get a sense of how much time per week you'll spend in class. For their Predictive Analytics for Business class, you'll study 10 hours a week for three months.

edX takes a slightly different approach to helping the masses upskill. edX offers MicroMasters, which are skill-based degrees offering "pathways to today's top jobs." The degrees are offered through a partnership with a host university but built through employer collaboration. Each degree program is "validated" by top companies. Career-changers can choose from a range of MicroMasters from design thinking to artificial intelligence to digital marketing.

As an added bonus, participants in edX MicroMasters programs may choose to continue their studies on campus at the host institution. For example, if you complete a MicroMasters in Digital Product Management offered in partnership with Boston University, you're eligible to apply to Boston University

Questrom School of Business, putting you on a path to earn a Master of Science degree in Digital Innovation. The credits you earn in the MicroMasters are already credited toward your on-campus degree. MicroMasters degrees are like a test run for the full master's degree.

All of the skill-based programs above offer learning and career support alongside their course instruction.

## **Stand-alone courses**

Stand-alone courses are online courses that help you learn a specific skill. There are hundreds of thousands of online courses to choose from. Sites like Udemy and Skillshare are full of courses to help you learn new skills. You'll find everything from Ink Drawing to Creative Writing to Excel Skills. LinkedIn Learning is another big player in this space. With classes like Advertising on Instagram to Creating Video for a Non-Profit, LinkedIn Learning offers "courses for every step of your career." If you want to learn it, chances are it's on one of these sites.

A standout example is freeCodeCamp. This nonprofit provides online coding courses for free. They offer a worldwide community of learners, open source projects to help you apply your coding skills, and hundreds of YouTube tutorials to support you.

While useful for learning one-off skills, stand-alone courses aren't ideal for career-changers who need a structured learning path. Stand-alone courses aren't part of a program or developed in concert with employer needs. They also might not have a portfolio component or career support. If you are the type of person who's a self-directed learner and good at creating your own learning path, these courses might be an ideal learning experience for you.

## Choosing the right online learning experience for career-changers

Choosing an online program takes some investigative work. There are five categories to consider when searching for an online program that supports your career transition:

- Length of program
- Cost
- Learning style
- Practical project experience
- Career support

The length of program should match the timing of your career transition. When do you want to start your new career?

Next, what can you afford? Most online programs cost money. Some obviously more than others. Luckily, some offer financial aid. Tech-based skill programs in particular are eager to get more women and minorities into tech fields in which they're underrepresented, so some of them offer scholarships.

Then think about your learning style. Do you want a supportive, engaged learning community? Are you good plowing through the material on your own or need a 1:1 interaction with the instructor? How do you prefer to discuss materials—through forums, Slack channels, or video chat? The answers to these questions will help you find a learning experience that matches your style.

Always look for practical projects when choosing an online learning path. Ideally, the online program you choose will provide an opportunity to work on an employer-sponsored project. The value of online learning is that the programs tend to be career-focused and provide project-based learning. If you're just

passively reading materials and not applying them, you're not going to build the skills you need to show future employers. You can't learn to code by reading a website!

Lastly, look for programs with career support. This book is a fabulous resource. But I can't be there to coach you through everything. Find a program that gives you career guidance, whether it's résumé help, mentorship, interview preparation, or connections to local employers.

For example, Skillcrush offers a Break into Tech program ideal for career-changers who don't have a tech background. In the 12-month program you'll take interactive classes to learn digital skills and make a "built-from-scratch personal portfolio website to use on the job search" and produce "three professional-quality web projects to show off."<sup>46</sup> On top of that, you get access to their alumni community and meetings with a career counselor. It's a good option for \$1,599, which is about \$130 a month.

Finding the right online learning experience in the sea of online learning options takes time and research. Take your time and go deep to learn if online learning experiences will be your ideal learning path.

## Community College

Community colleges are an overlooked path for career-changers, especially among graduates from four-year universities. Community colleges are often considered the more affordable path to a college degree. They provide general education requirements in a flexible, accessible environment. I started my college

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<sup>46</sup>Skillcrush, "Break Into Tech Blueprint."

experience at a community college. It wasn't fancy. But it was flexible. I worked full-time during the day and went to school at night, later transferring to a four-year school.

Community colleges are more than a path to a four-year degree. Increasingly, community college is an ideal learning path for career-changers. Students are graduating from two-year community college programs with job-ready skills in cutting-edge industries. Many community colleges offer short-term programs that map to high paid jobs, no four-year degree necessary.

For example, Portland Community College offers a certificate in Cybersecurity. All courses in the program map to "knowledge units of the National Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security requirements for a Center of Academic Excellence in Cyber Defense 2-Year Education."<sup>47</sup> Translation: you'll exit this program ready to work at a government-level job in cybersecurity. According to the Herjavec Group, a leading global security consulting firm, there will be 3.5 million unfilled cybersecurity positions by 2021. But it doesn't take a global advisory firm to tell you that, with massive data breaches happening monthly, companies desperately need cybersecurity professionals. The median salary for a cybersecurity specialist in 2016 was \$92,600, but went as high as \$140,000 a year.

If cybersecurity isn't your thing, that's cool. Community colleges are partnering with local employers to develop technical programs that meet employer needs. Lorraine Community College in Ohio offers a Micro Electromechanical Systems (MEMS) Short-Term Certificate. Students learn in the cleanroom and get hands-on experience working with "materials, equipment, protocols, and processes related to the microelectronics industry."

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<sup>47</sup>Portland Community College, "Computer Information Systems."

Students exit the program with some serious skills: “sensor and microcircuit operation, material and size constraints, microelectronic packaging, printed circuit design, manufacturing, and project management.”<sup>48</sup> The same community college also offers short-term certificates and associate degrees in automation engineering—preparing workers to work on autonomous systems for autonomous cars, 3D electronics design, and alternative energy.

The list of cutting-edge training programs at community colleges goes on. There are programs for drone technology operators, robotics, project management, entrepreneurship, and more.

Another advantage of community college programs is that they accept anyone. Seriously. No admissions bullshit here. You want to learn? Great, you’re in. Plus, taking a community college course creates a habit of learning. If you’ve been out of the learning experience for a while, attending a class at your community college will help you ease back into things.

With flexible courses during the evening and on weekends, community colleges are truly an ideal environment to learn to reskill. Plus, you’ll learn from people with different economic, social, political, and racial backgrounds. You’ll get outside of your bubble and really, we all need a lot more of that right now.

Community colleges are places to start exploring your career change options if you’re not sure what your next step is. Unlike traditional university certificate programs, community college certificate programs are tied to local employment demand. Community colleges, as their name suggests, are pillars of their community. They partner with local employers to train up an in-demand workforce. They play a significant role in efforts to help people reskill and transition into new career paths.

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<sup>48</sup>Lorain County Community College, “Micro Electromechanical Systems.”

Check in with your local community college to learn what programs they offer. You might be surprised.

## Bootcamps

Bootcamps are fast-paced programs that teach digital skills to people without a technical skills foundation. The beauty of bootcamps is that they're designed specifically for people who want to upskill. With the goal of helping working professionals acquire digital skills, they are ideal for anyone who wants a skill and salary upgrade. While they're a newer, alternative learning experience compared to traditional degree programs, they've evolved as one of the quickest ways for working professional to acquire foundational digital skills.

Bootcamps originally started as places to learn to code. Their existence filled an immediate need for employers who needed workers with digital skills. Prospective students could choose from learning experiences like front-end web development or back-end development. Front-end developers make the stuff you see online look good and work seamlessly. Back-end developers work on the technology behind the scenes that you don't see: databases, servers, and the application itself. Students can also learn how to become a mobile app developer, as many bootcamps offer iOS and Android app development paths.

All of these skills are highly in demand in the workplace. Front-end developers average around \$75,000 a year. More importantly though, they have the foundational knowledge and skills to progress in a digital workplace.



Bootcamp learning experiences are no longer limited to coding skills. They've since evolved to teach the skills that prepare workers for tech-adjacent roles in user experience (UX) design, user interaction (UI) design, data analytics, digital marketing, and data science.

## **Understanding financial aid for bootcamps**

Bootcamps aren't accredited like universities and colleges, so most will not be eligible for federal financial aid. Some bootcamps offer loans through partnerships with loan providers. Others are experimenting with income-based repayment options, commonly known as an ISA (Income Share Agreement). This financial model means students pay nothing through their education program and only pay after they start a job. The percentage you pay is set before you start the program. You may also pay more on a repayment based on your subject of study.

Lambda School is an all-online coding school that teaches computer science, iOS app development, and data science to career-changers. They offer an income-based repayment option instead of taking out a loan or paying \$20,000 for their education. Currently, students pay no money at the start of the program and pay 17 percent of their salary for two years, with a \$30K maximum total payment.

The ISA is emerging as a popular financial aid model for bootcamps and short-term skill programs. Much like taking out student loans has pros and cons, so does an ISA. In many cases, the ISA debt is held by Wall Street, which pools and trades the debt. While an ISA may allow you to upskill into a new career

without paying up front, the jury is out on how Wall Street will treat you long-term if you fall behind on repayment. So, take time to research your expected salary at graduation, pay attention to the interest rate, and always read the fine print of any ISA.

As bootcamps are still relatively new to the continuing education scene, it's important to take time to research bootcamp options. They are for-profit education systems with little government oversight. There is still debate on how well coding bootcamps prepare workers for high-paying jobs. As new bootcamps enter the market daily, and others close down due to lack of revenue, the quality of bootcamps varies greatly. SwitchUp and Course Report are excellent tools to see the rankings and feedback on bootcamps.

## Choosing the right bootcamp

Similar to online programs, these are the things that you need to look for when choosing a bootcamp:

- Free intro course
- Program details and syllabus
- Cost
- Learning style
- Practical project
- Career support
- Alumni outcomes

Many bootcamps offer a free intro course to understand their teaching style and find out if learning these digital skills is a

right fit for you. For example, Lambda School offers a free online course for beginners with no coding experience. Participants learn the basics of code and an introduction to the programming language JavaScript.

Unlike traditional degree programs, bootcamps should show you exactly what you'll learn in their programs. General Assembly is a global leader among bootcamps. For every program on their website, you'll learn about career support, financial aid options, price, syllabus, instructors, and projects that you'll work on. This level of transparency is important; these are fast-paced, short-term programs. You need to know what skills you'll learn, who you'll learn from, and what work you'll be able to do after graduation. You need to know exactly what you're getting before you buy.

## **Examining bootcamp learning styles**

Bootcamps are intensive programs. You will learn a lot of information and new skills in a short amount of time. Much like online degree programs, there is a variety of learning experiences and instructors between schools. In some schools, you work on your own. Others pair you with a mentor. Other bootcamps pair you with a partner to learn together, increasing the chances you can troubleshoot technical issues together. Take time to learn about the pace of the program, the learning community, and homework expectations outside of class.

Most instructors are industry professionals. But just because they're professionals doesn't mean they can teach! Spend time learning about the instructor's background and don't skip the free intro course.

Bootcamps are designed for building skills, so every bootcamp program should result in a project, ideally one that is built with employer or industry collaboration. Lambda School includes four weeks of Lambda Labs, where students participate in an “In-House Apprenticeship by building a real-world project in a small team.”<sup>49</sup> Participants in General Assembly’s Software Engineering Immersive program graduate with a portfolio of completed projects developed in collaboration with employers.

Bootcamps offer on-campus and online options. Take time to figure out which one fits your schedule and learning style best. Check the length of programs that match your career transition goals. Some bootcamps offer part-time programs in the evening, while others are full-time, 9 to 5 classes.

As bootcamps are designed for career-changers, they should offer career support. Some might offer job placement. Others might have connections and offer a hiring pipeline to local employers. A good bootcamp offers access to mentors and industry professionals and teaches you how to build contacts in your new field.

Inquire about career support and job placement during the admissions process. Ask to talk to alumni about their job search experience. Since the quality between bootcamps varies, ask bootcamp graduates how employers reacted to their qualifications and new skills. Ask them how they made their career transition too.

If the bootcamps can’t offer you anyone who can speak to the learning and job search experience, the bootcamp isn’t a good fit for you.

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<sup>49</sup>Lambda School, “User Experience Design.”

## Certificate Programs

Upskilling through certificate programs is a growing path for many career-changers. Certificate programs have exploded in popularity over the years, especially as universities seek to offer shorter, more affordable programs to working professionals. While affordability varies by institution and program, certificates are cheaper than a full degree program. Plus, you can qualify for financial aid to pay for certificates offered through accredited universities.

The data on career outcomes from non-degree credentialing—i.e., certificate holders—is hard to come by. Employers’ attitudes toward certificate holders are difficult to pin down, which makes it hard to know if certificates hold their value in the market.

Certificate programs are useful for career-changers who need to understand the vocabulary and systems in a new industry. They provide a short, direct path to learn as much as possible about a new industry. But when it comes to skill development and career outcomes, certificate programs are hit and miss.

Recently, I came across a certificate in Higher Education Administration from Northwestern. For \$19,975, I can “deepen (my) understanding of the field and expand (my) networks.”<sup>50</sup> Details on career outcomes or paths are notably absent. Instead, the page offers the basics of college career services: “ongoing professional development support, one-on-one career coaching, academic advising, and networking opportunities.” There was nothing to reassure me that investing \$20,000 into a certificate program will make me more employable. The lack of testimonials

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<sup>50</sup>Northwestern, “SESP.”

from employers raving about the certificate or explaining how the certificate signaled a candidate's competitiveness on the open job market, was telling.

### **Certificates are not certifications**

Certificates are not the same as certifications, though you'd be forgiven for mixing them up. It's easy to think a university certificate in higher education administration will provide the same salary bump as a Cisco Certified Network Professional certification (it doesn't). The former is a revenue generation program from a university with little focus on skill building and an unclear career trajectory. The latter is an industry-approved career training model with clearly defined career paths.

In a 2018 report by Burning Glass Technologies titled "The Narrow Ladder: The Value of Industry Certifications in the Job Market," they defined certifications as "awarded by a certifying body, often an industry association or trade group, based on an examination process assessing whether an individual has acquired the designated knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform a specific job."<sup>51</sup> This differs from certificates, which the report defines as "short-term, professionally oriented credentials awarded by an educational institution (as opposed to an industry body) based on completion of specific coursework." The same report found that in 2015, around 1.5 million job postings required certifications, whereas only about 130,000 postings required certificates.

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<sup>51</sup>Burning Glass Technologies, "The Narrow Ladder."

Translation: certifications are proof of your ability to do a job whereas certificates are proof of domain knowledge. Certificates and certifications are used interchangeably but they are not the same. Certifications are more valued by employers in the marketplace than certificates. As a career-changer, certificates may not hold the value you expect them to hold in the job search.

### **How to make a certificate work for your career change**

Certificate programs are revenue-generating programs for universities, so you have to get beyond the marketing hype and do a bit of digging to find out if a certificate helps you develop the skills for a career change. Use these questions to guide you:

- Does the certificate add to or improve your power skills?
- Does the certificate improve your technical skills?
- Does the certificate position you for a hybrid job?
- Has the certificate been developed with industry or employer input?
- Does this certificate frequently appear as a requirement in job postings?
- Will you learn skills in this program that will still be relevant in five years?
- Does the institution offering the certificate offer connections to employers?

Certificates do not convey the same value as a college degree to employers, even if a certificate is offered by a brand name school. If you are considering a certificate program, ask smart

questions and conduct deep research to learn exactly how a certificate prepares you for your career jump.

Make sure the certificate program you choose helps you build the skills you need for your destination job and makes you a competitive candidate in the job search.

## Workplace Learning

One of the most overlooked ways to build new skills is your own workplace. I'm all for a fresh start, but sometimes there are magical opportunities in your own professional backyard. And sometimes they're free.

Get to know learning experiences offered at your workplace. Start by checking out what's happening in your HR department. You probably haven't thought about them since you signed all those forms at the start of your job, but they're home to a lot of resources. Check out the internal employee website and look for training options like mentorship programs, upcoming workshops, and internal trainings. Some employers offer free subscriptions to online learning platforms, like LinkedIn Learning. While we've left the glory baby boomer days where employers covered employee tuition, there are a handful of companies that offer tuition reimbursement. For example, Starbucks currently offers free tuition for Arizona State University's online degree program.

Next, ask your boss what professional development options you're eligible for. Better yet, come prepared. Find a conference in your industry. Professional conferences are filled with workshops and talks that introduce you to trends in your field. Ask your boss if there's money in the budget to send you to a conference. If



you're more advanced in your career, ask your boss if they'd cover an executive program like an Exec MBA or a tech-focused degree.

Asking for the opportunity to learn shows your boss you're interested in your professional development. Employers love that. Make these asks for professional development even if you're planning to leave your job. Do not feel guilty. I know that's taboo but remember, employers are replaceable. Take advantage of every training opportunity they provide. You never know, you might learn so much in your company that you end up getting a job offer and a raise. So, get busy asking.

Lastly, get yourself on a project where you have to learn and use a new set of skills. Bonus points if it's on a project outside of your own department. Find a project where you're building or producing something of value like a piece of software, a new marketing campaign, a workshop, or a new data set. Challenge yourself to take on a role that's normally outside of your comfort zone. Hate speaking in public? Build your skills by offering to present the results of your project to management. Project work teaches you how to apply new skills and builds collaboration skills. You might discover you're really good at something that you'd never done before.

Your workplace may be full of learning opportunities. Take advantage of them and experiment in your workplace.

## DIY Learning

I'm obsessed with a series on YouTube called CrashCourse. CrashCourse dives deep into a range of subjects like physics, philosophy, economics, biology, literature, data science, and more. With nearly a billion views, I'm not the only one who finds this

content useful. The Pew Research firm found that 37 percent of all millennials tap into career development content on YouTube. YouTube is obviously a go-to place for learning, but so are podcasts, free online courses, and email newsletters. We're in the glory days of DIY learning. The trick is learning how to use all this content to fuel your DIY learning path.

To build your own DIY learning adventure, start with your desired professional outcome and work backward. What domain knowledge and skills do you want to learn? Then investigate your resources. As you discover opportunities to learn something new, look for credibility. What background does this person have to be an authority on the subject? Are they trying to sell you something? Are they making promises that are too good to be true? Do they have testimonials?

Next, find a way to apply the skills you're learning. Reading and watching videos is passive learning. While you'll get valuable information, you still need to apply what you're learning to build new skills. Either find a project at work or create a project of your own. For example, Harvard put their famous computer science course on YouTube. The nine-lecture series gives an overview of algorithms and data structures, as well as an introduction to coding languages like Python, JavaScript, and CSS. While you won't learn to code from this class, it's a great start to understanding coding and the technology that underpins our daily lives. Plus, it'll help you figure out what programming language you might want to learn.

Combining the Harvard YouTube series with a free resource like Codecademy, a free online school that teaches people how to code, is an affordable way to learn to upskill.

At the very least, start writing about what you're learning. The process of summarizing your learning builds skills. You'll

learn how to write concisely. You'll build knowledge management skills that you can use in future jobs. Seeking out information and making sense of it is an in-demand skill.

In the job search, you're going to have to show how apply your new knowledge and skills. Simply telling an employer, "I read some articles and watched a few YouTube videos, hire me," doesn't cut it. Showing them what you've learned, either through your writing or self-driven projects, will make you stand out. Practice communicating your new learnings and you will be well on your way to nailing your destination job interview.

## **Making a career change with DIY learning**

Start by making a personal learning syllabus for yourself. A personal learning syllabus keeps you organized and focused. Map out a timeline for learning a new skill. Set a learning goal for each week that gets you closer to that goal. Include what you'll learn each week and list the resource that you'll learn from.

Next, build your habit. Choosing the DIY learning approach requires more self-discipline than other learning experiences. It's easy to flake on yourself. It's also easy to end up down a YouTube rabbit hole that has nothing to do with what you're learning. Commit to distraction-free learning for 30 minutes to one hour each day. Commit to giving yourself space to dive into the learning experience, free from other distractions.

Finally, find a community of people to support your learning. Whether it's a Facebook or Slack group, a meet up, or just friends who are also into learning, find your people. Learning together is more motivational than learning alone. Share your learning goals and struggles.

Many career-changers include DIY learning alongside other learning experiences. For example, if you've heard that data science is the top-paying career in the US but don't know anything about data science, it's worth watching a few videos about data science before signing up at a data science bootcamp.

### **Make DIY learning a professional habit**

The future belongs to those who continue to learn throughout their career. Use tactics from DIY learning to keep exploring trends and ideas in your industry, even after your career change. It's easy to do. Imagine replacing 15 minutes of social media scrolling with 15 minutes of listening to an industry podcast or watching a quick tutorial on a skill related to your job. Imagine what you'd learn after a month or year. Upskilling habits like these create agile workers, introduce you to future opportunities, and keep your skills relevant in a fast-changing world of work.