



Dean Lazar's
Golden Guide

Pragmatic Career Advice for Smart Young People

Lydia Lazar

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Preface

Are you a person who wants to be intellectually challenged at work, but you are not 100% sure of what direction you want your career to take?

Do you want to help solve the difficult challenges our world faces, but do not know what you want to do — much less how to make a living doing it??

Many young people seeking employment opportunities and career advancement today feel overwhelmed and underprepared for the challenges they face as they leave college and enter the workforce. There is a lot of apparently conflicting advice, and the constant media barrage about the decline and transformation of the U.S. economy can depress even the most optimistic job seeker.

Today's college students can brilliantly navigate the world through smartphone technology—yet many digital natives are frustrated and intimidated when it comes to creating in-person real world relationships. The good news is that there are skills and behaviors that you can learn to help you leverage your digital social world to create the professional relationships you need to have as you face an increasingly competitive work world.

This Golden Guide is designed for all young people who want to find opportunities to be *paid to think* and to continue to develop their skills, while also making a contribution to the work of a larger enterprise.

Thanks to the digital technologies that are changing everything about how employers recruit and screen for new employees, *even the most well educated and self-disciplined young people are scrambling to find substantive full time work opportunities*. When every opening receives thousands and even tens of thousands of applicants, the odds of getting past the gatekeepers and into an interview are truly daunting.

As you move from job to job and into progressively more challenging and responsible roles in different organizations, you will face a rapidly changing world of work. Successful careers in the 21st century will follow different trajectories than in the past, but successful people will always be those who go after what they want with grace and humility. I want to help you *now and for years to come*, so this Guide is focused on how you can develop a set of *habits of mind and behavior*—your own personal, *best practices*—that will serve you throughout your career.

The expression “**Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity**” is attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca. By incorporating these habits of mind and behavior into your life at an early age, you will not only prepare yourself to be lucky in your career: you will set yourself on course for a fulfilling, satisfying life.

Welcome

Golden Tip #1

“You are what you repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

—Aristotle

You decide your level of effort and your attention to detail.

You will learn the most if you try your best to do A+ work, *even if it is not recognized or rewarded by others.*

Congratulations on deciding to take control of your time, your energy and your attention as you focus on achieving your career objectives. No matter where you are in terms of your education or your career, this Golden Guide can help you. The suggestions and advice in these pages will guide you along the path to realizing your dreams... and with luck, over time, you will find an intellectually challenging job and develop an emotionally and financially rewarding career.

We live in a world where getting paid to think is not a guaranteed outcome for even the most highly educated people. There will be competition at every step of your academic and professional life. To succeed and prosper, you must be smart, prepared and lucky. You must also be ambitious and persistent, and you must continually seek out new skills and new opportunities to be challenged.

You may have been told that to find a job, you must study the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering or Math.) While it is certainly true that there are many opportunities in STEM fields, those are not the only careers worth pursuing. This Guide is for all students, regardless of major. The strategies described here to help you advance in your career will apply to all industries and all employers.

- In Chapter One, you will find foundational suggestions for specific actions to take as you begin to define yourself as a young professional.
- In Chapter Two we take an in depth look at strategies for handling the important, invasive and risky world of social media.
- In Chapter Three, I offer some detailed advice for resume, cover and thank you letter writing, for acing job interviews, and for thinking about additional credentials throughout your career.

- Chapter Four explores different kinds of organizations, the roles you might find in them, and smart strategies to defeat obstacles and get hired.
- Chapters Five and Six provide guidance for navigating the working world—how to deal with the ups and downs of daily life, and how to think creatively about the life and career you are building for yourself.

At the end of the book there are some specialized resource pages, including a section on applying to U.S. graduate schools and another with specific, targeted advice for international students studying in the U.S.

Spread throughout the book, you will find **Dean Lazar's Golden Tips**—short, memorable messages that can help you stay focused and productive.

1 | Stepping Into Your Career

Let's Get Started!

You *can* find opportunities to do challenging work, get paid a reasonable wage, and keep developing your skill set. How? By taking a few steps every day to prepare yourself to succeed. This means being *intentional* about how you spend your time, and *focused* as you cultivate expertise in different subjects.

Step One: Identifying Your Interests and Skills

Starting now, you must honestly examine your interests, your strengths, your challenges and your dreams. *Only you can know which subjects and activities really engage your mind and your heart.* To succeed, you must face your fears, embrace your passions and take a few steps forward every day, every month, and every semester. If you nurture your intellectual and professional capabilities in this way you will definitely find a job and a career that will both suit you and thrill you!

If you are already a senior in college, or a recent graduate, or even studying in a graduate degree program, the same advice applies to you as to younger undergraduates. You will grow professionally only if you continue to increase your self-awareness and stay honest with yourself about your evolving interests and passions. Many jobs do not turn out as we expect; one important early career lesson is that we learn a lot about ourselves as we move through positions and organizations, and what interested us as students may be less compelling as we grow into our twenties.

Golden Tip #2

Use the Resources Available to You.

If you are already out of school, go to the library or a local bookstore. Look around for mentors and advisors in your workplace and community. There is wisdom and experience all around you.

Use the Resources Available to You

Explore all the career support services your school offers. Don't hesitate to go back multiple times to the office, and consider meeting with more than one counselor or staffer, as different people may suggest diverse resources to you.

Cultivate relationships on campus: you are surrounded by scholarly professionals who are committed to helping young people discover their full potential! Be gracious and appreciative of their time.

Meet your professors during office hours and, in a polite and professional way, ask them about their careers, their research, current controversies in their field, and how they see their field changing.

Tell professors and others you meet on campus about your interests and ask them what career advice they might have for you, given your interests.

What Interests You Professionally?

You have probably identified an academic major, but have you taken the time to consider what you truly enjoy thinking about and what professions will enable you to continue your intellectual explorations? It can be a challenge to identify your professional interests, and you should spend a fair amount of time thinking about this, since you want to make sure that you are preparing yourself for a career that you will enjoy.

One place to start is in the Bureau of Labor Statistics data on different industries and professions. In this free U.S. government data set, you can learn about many different industries. For each industry, you can find information about working conditions, specific occupations within the industry, training and advancement, earnings and benefits, and the current employment outlook. See the **Resource File: Internet Sites**.

I strongly recommend that you go to talk with a career counselor. Although many students dislike going to their career services offices, if you approach the team there with an open mind, I am sure you can find something useful from the encounter. Career exploration conversations should be fun—after all, the point is to dream and fantasize about your future life, with the shared goal of identifying resources to help you realize your aspirations.

In addition to speaking one-on-one with a counselor, you should make sure you are aware of the other services the career office provides. For example, your career services office probably offers talks, usually entitled something like “Exploring Careers in [profession]” and often featuring a guest speaker from a particular employer who is recruiting at your school. Take the opportunity to learn firsthand about different fields by attending these talks and asking the speakers about their careers.

One very important thing to keep in mind is that, in general, there is not really a specific major that matches a specific professional career. While it is true that there are some professions (like nursing or architecture) that require the very specific skills taught in particular undergraduate programs, *most majors can lead to a variety of professions and career opportunities.*

This is because the world’s jobs, in fact, are not organized by academic discipline.

With good writing, analytical thinking and research skills, all graduates can find work. There is a wide variety of industries, a range of employers within those industries, and many different job functions even within the most technically oriented companies. The primary challenge for young professionals at the start their careers is to identify subject(s) that interest them enough to pursue and succeed at a position as an entry level employee.

As discussed in more detail later in the Guide, the careers of the 21st century will be different from those of the past century in many ways. Successful people will be those who:

- Are **strong communicators** who can combine information from different formats and interpret it to make persuasive narratives and arguments,
- Can **adapt quickly** to changing circumstances,
- Can **anticipate challenges** and opportunities before they arise, and
- Have **strong interpersonal skills** and can appropriately interpret social and emotional cues.

STEM majors (Science, Technology, Engineering or Math) often seem to have clearer paths to employment, with technically oriented companies seeking their particular technical skills for entry-level positions. However even STEM majors don't work solely with those technical "hard" skills, and to succeed in the work world they will need to be able to communicate just as well as their non-STEM colleagues.

Humanities majors (such as English, History, Comparative Literature or Philosophy students) may seem to have less obvious career paths, but this is really a strength—not a weakness—of these students. As later chapters explain in more detail, *the careers of today's young professionals are going to be defined by the capacity to learn new skills and communicate effectively with colleagues and clients, and Humanities majors should excel in these domains.*

Talk with your counselor about as many industries and roles as you can, and do not hesitate to **actively plan out several possible career paths**. You are a smart, creative person and there are there are many different fields and job functions to consider as you begin your career exploration.

Whatever your major, consider pursuing positions as varied as marketing, product development, journalism, education, project management, counseling, consulting, sales, fundraising, recruitment, commercial business, arts administration, nonprofit program management, operations analysis or even market research for a multinational corporation. There really is no limit to what you can do with your life, if you face the future with a sense of personal agency and an optimistic spirit.

Try to visit the career services resource library when you have at least 45–60 minutes to read around in the books and other resources. You will find a variety of materials that you can review to learn about different professions, industries, companies and organizations. It's likely that you will learn about fields you never knew about, and that you will want to schedule a return visit—or two. **Give yourself enough time to really explore the many diverse professions and fields that hire college graduates.**

Identifying your interests is the first step toward developing your professional capacity. The next step is to understand which skills those jobs require, and frankly assess how prepared you are for the entry level positions you will be seeking. Your strategy as you do this personal assessment is to:

- think as broadly as you can about your existing abilities and experiences,
- clarify those skills that you have already developed, and
- identify the skills you need to cultivate to ensure that you will be a strong candidate for the positions you seek.

Remember: no one was born with any of these skills! Everyone has to develop them, and you may as well start while you are in school to grow your skill set(s) so you will be competitive for the jobs you want.

Golden Tip #3

You Drive the CAR in Your Career.

Cultures and families are different, and some people feel obligated to pursue the profession chosen for them by their families. Whether or not you are paying your own college tuition, you are the person who will be living your life, and you must drive the career car.

Your personal objective, as you look for post-graduate employment, is to be hired into positions where you can *learn on the job* and *develop new skills* as you mature. Keep in mind that successful professionals identify and work to develop the skills corresponding to the positions they hope to obtain *next*—that is, after they master the job they have now. If you are intentional and thoughtful, you can strengthen your mastery of those skills that really interest and motivate you so that you will be qualified and able to move up as you move on to another job, company or even industry.

Throughout this Guide I will offer suggestions for continuing to strengthen your skill sets so you can stay competitive as the world of work changes around you.

Key Skill Sets

There are four key areas where employers expect applicants to demonstrate their skills—and these skill sets are applied in a wide range of industries and at all levels of employment from entry level to senior management. The four key skill sets are:

- analytical and problem solving skills
- written and verbal communication skills
- project management skills
- interpersonal skills

These are not the only skills in the work world, but they are foundational for work that requires *thinking*—and that's the work that you want to do. At the end of the day, people hire for “competence plus fit” so you need to be sure that you are continuing to *master the specific skills that employers in your field are looking for*—even as you build out all your other social and professional skills.

In **Chapter Three** we will review how to be a competitive applicant for the positions that interest you. For example, you will see that you need to make sure that your resume and social media profiles—such as on Linked In or Twitter—highlight *your specific skills within these skill sets*.

In the **Resource File: Key Skill Sets** at the back of this Guide you will find detailed phrases that you should modify to describe your specific skills and experiences. Take the time to review the skill sets and think creatively about your experiences and capabilities.

Once you can describe your own interests and skills *using the words and phrases that match the language that employers use to describe their open positions*, you will search much more effectively for jobs and be a more competitive applicant.

Step Two: Matching Your Interests to the Available Opportunities

As you will learn later in this Guide, the discovery of new opportunities as you move ahead in your career is most strongly correlated with the amount of networking you do, and spending too much time searching for job opportunities on the Internet can be counterproductive and demoralizing. However—and especially when you are exploring career options—the *Internet is an incredible research resource* that you should use to learn about how your interests and skills match up with what is out there in the world of work.

Explore Your Options

Use the Internet to broaden your knowledge of professions and industries. Be intentional about this research and keep track of the companies and job titles that you discover. Be as open minded as you can be: imagine your dream career and think big! After all, if you don't know anything about a profession, you can't know if you might enjoy it. Give yourself permission to fantasize and to dream—but be sure to stay grounded in the reality of real jobs.

Look at all the different job titles on **Indeed.com** or another job board or website and review the job responsibilities for the jobs that interest you. Note the kinds of skills that are needed to accomplish the tasks and responsibilities, and the language the employers are using to describe those skills. You can start with some of the job board sites in **Resource File: Internet Sites**.

It is important to keep track of websites and other information you come across in your research. Start a **Career Exploration notebook** or **create a Folder** on your computer where you can save information in Excel spreadsheets or other documents.

Work with Career Services

Also be sure to work with your career counselor to:

- clarify a short list of industries/job titles to explore,
- identify important books and other resources that can help you,
- learn how to access your school's job postings and
- schedule mock interviews and resume reviews.

Most students are surprised by the wide range of industries, employers and jobs that exist—and many are disappointed to discover that they have spent time studying subjects that do not prepare them for the careers they decide they want to pursue. *Remember: picking a major does not mean you cannot study other things, and does not mean you will have only one professional path to follow.*

The advice in this Guide is designed to help you cross the bridge between the end of college or graduate school and the world of work. So if you have decided that you did not learn or are not studying the right thing, don't panic! By thinking about these things now, and working with this Guide, you can develop the skills, contacts and knowledge base to grow into a career that you will love. ***Whatever you have been doing (or not doing) up until now doesn't matter: the important thing is how you think and act going forward.***

And remember that everyone will have multiple jobs—and even multiple careers—over their lifetimes: current thinking suggests that young professionals today are likely to have as many as 15 different jobs by the time they retire. As long as you continually seek out intellectual challenges and pro-actively develop new skills, you will be doing all the right things to ensure that you will be lucky and prepared when a new and exciting opportunity presents itself to you.

Be Intentional

Be intentional with your time and your energy. Without realizing it, many people drift along and wait for things to happen to them. They wonder why their friends seem to be doing exciting things or getting great chances in life. In fact, it's far too easy to be complacent when you have gotten into college, or started your first job. The distractions and pleasures of life can fill your days and leave you with no energy or time to search out new challenges.

The truth is, the world doesn't care if you succeed or not. Only those who have your best interests at heart—hopefully your family or a special mentor—care about your happiness and professional achievements. No matter what your circumstances, to be a mature and successful person, you must accept the responsibility to take care of yourself—no matter what happens around you.

So be intentional about your time, your energy and your money. For example, you must manage your financial assets so that you are free to explore new ideas and potential opportunities. This means you must save as much money as you can. If you add up all the money spent in a week on “small things” (like expensive coffee drinks or junk food snacks) and divert just 50% of that money to a savings account, you will start to build a financial cushion that will enable you to make a trip to a new city to explore options, or pay for a course that will help you develop a needed skill.

Golden Tip #4

Be Intentional and Strategic.

The world doesn't care if you succeed or not, so the burden is always on you

- To focus your attention,
- To continually motivate yourself, and
- To take steps that enable you to grow and prosper in your career.

Golden Tip #5

Think Globally, Act Locally.

The world needs you to care about social and economic justice, about natural resources and climate change, and about creating opportunities for everyone in our communities to live decent lives.

Step Three: Stepping Into Your Career

The best way to build toward the career you want is to start thinking and working as if you already have it. Imagine that every single thing you are doing now is part of your career. Your courses, social activities, creative thinking and even your dreams are all foundational and generative for the person you will become.

As you prepare to leave college and enter the workforce, think about your values and aspirations.

- Aside from earning your way in the world, what do you hope to accomplish with your life?
- What are your expectations for social, economic and personal success?
- Are there particular social or political causes that capture your imagination?
- When you imagine yourself looking back on your life and career many years from now, what do you hope you will see as your achievements—and how do you hope people will describe you and your work?

You may not be able to answer these questions now, but it's a good idea to entertain them—after all, your life's work is far more than just what you do for money. It's the sum of all your actions, interactions, and social contributions—and, as explored more fully in **Chapters Five and Six**, you need to be mindful and intentional so that you do, in fact, integrate your career achievements within a fulfilling life.

It's also important to always keep in mind that, while the world may not care about your career success, *you do need to care about the world*. We all want and need a world that is politically, economically and socially stable. We all need and want a safe and clean environment, and decent communities with good schools. We also need and want societies that are more fair, more just and more caring...and we won't get that world if people focus only on themselves and their careers.

This Guide offers you a long term game plan for personal career achievement, however building a successful career doesn't mean you can't also pursue social justice through engaging in, and supporting, social and political activism in your community. Indeed, I urge you to support efforts underway to improve the world around you. You won't regret investing your energy, time and talent this way—and you will enlarge your social circle while contributing to the greater good. Even more importantly, you will be *living your values*—and by staying true to those principles, you will enhance your professional reputation over the long term.

As you gain experience and agency in the world, you will find that the more you align your professional life with your personal values and expectations, the happier and more fulfilled you will be.

The remainder of this Chapter shifts in focus, towards what others may see when they meet you, and the steps you need to take to launch your career. But even as you step up your professional game, you should not neglect inward, reflective thinking.

Chapter one continues, and concludes with the following take-aways:

Chapter One Take Aways

1. **Explore your interests, strengths and options.** Use the assessment tools and other resources in your college career office.
2. **Be Intentional. Don't drift along!** Challenge yourself and always seek out new opportunities to learn skills and meet new people.
3. **Be Brave and Be Persistent.** Take small steps every day and every week to boost your confidence and gain experience.
4. **Be Prepared and Be Alert.** Keep up with the news generally, and also be an avid reader of blogs, websites and professional publications that cover your topics of interest.
5. **Network, Network, Network.** Meet new people, ask questions, be open and friendly.

Pragmatic Career Advice for Smart Young People

The Golden Guide is designed for all young people who want to find opportunities *to be paid to think* and to continue to develop their skills. The tone and approach is supportive, warm and engaging. Students and young professionals will benefit from reading through the Guide multiple times over the early years of their careers, and they will come back time and again to its specific actionable advice and suggestions.

Some may define pragmatism as the opposite of idealism, but pragmatic thinking is practical and pro-active, in support of your ideals and dreams. Pragmatic behavior is self regarding but not selfish, and this Golden Guide will help those who want to be efficient with their time, effective with their efforts, and successful in their careers and in their lives.

“I love this book! Wise words to live by, great habits to cultivate, and specific actions to take — both online and in the real world — to get an edge in today’s hypercompetitive marketplace.”

— Tracy Samantha Schmidt, *Socially Authentic*



ABOUT LYDIA LAZAR

As an admissions and career services dean at the University of Chicago’s Harris School for Public Policy, and, earlier, as the dean for international law and policy development at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, Lydia Lazar helped hundreds of students prepare to win in the career marketplace. A graduate of Dartmouth College and Columbia University, Lydia was initially trained as an urban geographer and worked on water, waste and energy issues in both the public and private sectors. She later earned a J.D. degree and worked briefly as a corporate lawyer before pivoting to academia in 2001. Learn more about her consulting activities, previous publications and outreach activities at www.lydialazar.com.

US \$14.95

ISBN-13: 978-0-9996220-0-1

Published by NIRA 1920 LLC

www.lydialazar.com

