

Why a productive gap year could help you choose a career

Getting a degree alone won't guarantee you a job. A gap year lets you test different careers

By Tom Griffiths, founder of *gapyear.com* Thursday, 26 June 2008

¹ I'm going to let you into a little secret. Some people hate their jobs. Unfortunately, they not only hate their jobs, they hate their career path, life *prospects*, debt situation and the fact that this is all happening to them before the age of 30.

² I don't want to be the Bad News Bunny appearing on results day, bursting bubbles and *deflating* dreams, but I think it is important to insert a touch of realism at this stage. Once you have your results in your hand, you will make a life decision that will stay with you forever. This decision could cost you over £10,000, maybe even £20,000 or more and will eat up years of your life. Do you want to pay that much and work that hard to achieve something which may not ultimately deliver your perfect career? Aren't I just the fun boy at the party with my doom and gloom!

³ Let's meet a case in point. At 18 he was going to set the world on fire. His ambitions were of writing for the national newspapers, maybe making editor one day. He got the grades to study journalism,

graduated reasonably well, but failed to even get an interview for the top jobs. With thousands of talented writers entering an already packed marketplace, an editorial assistant role at his local paper was probably a realistic expectation.

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⁴ The first day he had ever seen a room full of journalists was his first day at work. He had no idea of the reality; he just followed the dream in his head. Aged 28, working in a job he hates, watching his friends progress up the ladder in jobs they love, he often wonders where it all went wrong. Swap journalism for law, or the news room for a classroom and you'll have a pretty good picture of the thousands of young professionals stuck in the wrong jobs within a few years of graduating.

⁵ The fastest growing gap year market is the 25-to-35-year-old career gappers – those changing career who usually take a travel gap year in between (this is when we see them on *gapyear.com*). Our research has shown that the vast majority admit to making the wrong decision at 18. Had they taken the time to see the job in action in the workplace, they might well have taken a bit more time to choose a career that suited them. With *hindsight* many consider the idea of work experience during a gap year as an option that would have helped their decision-making process.

⁶ Chris Page, 19, contacted me a few years ago requesting online journalism work experience. Armed with a CV that *boasted* a long list of work experience placements (more than five with national newspapers and major TV networks) and a *stack* of references *attesting* to his professionalism and work ethic, it took me seconds to invite him down. He had used his gap year to full effect to build a CV that knocked others out of the ➡

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➡ water. You can't beat experience. I knew he wasn't green and that he knew what would be expected of him. He didn't let me down.

⁷ On graduation Chris could contact a *host* of employers who already had knowledge of his abilities. He could also use his network to find paid work during university holidays.

⁸ Taking a gap year to 'road test' an industry has few downsides and is becoming more popular. You wouldn't buy a £20,000 car without taking it for a spin round the block. So why invest £20,000 chasing a job that you're no good at, don't like or ultimately isn't *attainable*? Imagine getting down to the last two for a journalism job and going head-to-head with Chris. What's in your armoury?

'You can't beat experience'

⁹ Getting a degree alone won't guarantee you a job. Sorry, that's a fact. Vocational courses aside (a degree in medicine is still essential, one hopes, for doctors), many employers won't even look at that bit of your CV. Everyone has one. It's the other stuff that makes, not 'helps', you stand out.

¹⁰ The bottom line is this: if you're not 100 per cent sure that your degree will lead you to a job that makes you *leap* out of bed with enthusiasm every morning, then stop for a minute. Wanting to rush straight to university for the social

life isn't a good enough reason to make a decision with a £20,000 price tag. Remember that there is another option.

¹¹ If you're in the 'unsure' category, taking a gap year to test jobs and work out what you want to do in life should be the *priority*. If this is the immediate road ahead for you, remember that it is not a 'year off'. You need to stay focused, get as many work placements as possible, find out what path suits you and then to use what you have learned to find a place at university next year. And then don't stop. Chris didn't. ■