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Job Shadowing Sheds Light on the World of Work

Whether you're a student exploring the world of work as part of the college and career planning process or an adult contemplating a career change, it's important to get a glimpse behind the scenes to evaluate how well the job suits you. Job shadowing is a great way to shine a spotlight on careers of interest to you!

The Opening Curtain: What is Job Shadowing?

Job shadowing, a best practice of [Career Literacy™](#), is an integral part of the "[backwards planning](#)" strategy Career Vision promotes. A job shadowing experience is literally spending time "in the shadow" of a person performing his / her job. It's a day-long *workplace visit* with someone working within a position, career, or industry of interest to you (although it's important to note virtual job shadows via Zoom or related technology are becoming more common).

While occupational research, reading job descriptions, and conducting informational interviews are all great ways to learn about an occupation, job shadowing provides a far more realistic portrait of the "day in the life" of the worker.

Think of job shadowing as a way to step onto a stage and imagine yourself as the lead character of a play. A job shadow experience helps you answer these questions:

- Can I see myself in this role?
- Performing these types of tasks?
- Collaborating with these kinds of people?
- Working in this kind of environment?
- Using these types of materials, tools, and technologies?

Job shadowing is most frequently done by high school or college students. Even so, it's an excellent activity for adults considering a job or career change. It can even be conducted within a company when considering a future move to another position or department. Sometimes employees even get a chance to temporarily cover another employee's job while that person is on a medical leave (which is a fantastic way to "audition" for a new role). In the context of cross-training, job shadowing offers the



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opportunity to gain additional skills and knowledge that can enhance flexibility and fluidity within the organization.

In addition, job shadowing is a common component of the onboarding process. “Onboarding” (also referred to as “organizational socialization”) is a systematic approach to integrating a new employee into the company or new department. It is also used to groom a current employee for a more advanced position (much like an understudy in a play). The shadowee benefits as does the host, who can develop mentoring, coaching, and training skills in the process.

The Playbill: What Happens during a Job Shadow?

Job shadowing is most effective when expectations are discussed in advance, so that the job shadow day can be structured accordingly. “Act 1” might include a tour of the workplace, a discussion / “show and tell” about job responsibilities, and attendance in meetings.

For example, an architect arranged for a high school student to meet with each of the five other employees in the office to learn about their responsibilities and contributions to the firm's projects. The architect also showed the student the design software, 3-dimensional models of the building projects, and presentation boards with samples of flooring, upholstery, and paint colors selected by the interior designers. This made for a rich experience for the student and a rewarding one for the architect as well.

The “Final Act” customarily includes a short debrief at the end of the day, giving the shadowee to ask any additional questions that come to mind and to reflect on the job shadow experience,

Cast of Characters: Whom Will You Shadow?

Ideally, you should choose people currently working in the job you want to explore. Shadow several individuals in a particular field, in different work environments, so you can compare and contrast your experiences and learnings. Students may find it easier to identify with younger professionals who are in the earlier career stages.



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Depending on your particular circumstances, there are several ways you can find people to shadow. For example:

- *High school students* – Check to see if your school has a job shadowing program or if a school counselor or teacher can assist you.

In addition, you may be able to participate in [National Groundhog Job Shadow Day \(NGJSD\)](#). This annual event is championed by the U.S. Department of Labor, America's Promise - Alliance for Youth, and Junior Achievement. Nationwide, more than a million students and 100,000 businesses participate each year. Ask your guidance counselor if your high school takes part in NGJSD.

Also, participate in [Take Our Daughters & Sons to Work Day](#). Talk to your parents about the activities their employers have planned (including opportunities to shadow employees in various jobs.)

- *College students* – Some colleges offer formal job shadowing programs. For instance, [University of Nebraska Medical Center](#) has a program designed for their health sciences students as well as adults exploring a career change into health care. Also, [Loyola University](#) coordinates opportunities across various occupational fields through its shadowing program

Your college's Career Services staff may be able to suggest individuals or organizations to contact for job shadowing, based on their connections to employers. Additionally, your school may have an alumni network; contact the Career Services and Alumni Relations staff for referrals.

- *Network* – Parents or mid-career adults may know someone who works in a particular career (or perhaps a related company or industry). Ask them for names of people who might be willing to serve as your job shadow host. Even if they don't know someone personally, your parents and others may be able to use social networking sites like LinkedIn to find contacts for you.
- *Professional Associations* – Call the professional organizations associated with the occupation or industry you're exploring. Professional associations promote their field, often have local chapters, and may be able to connect you with someone in your geographic area whom you can approach. For example, the [International Association of Venue Managers](#) offers the opportunity to shadow venue and facility management professionals as they carry out their daily operations.



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Use these websites to find professional associations:

- [CareerOneStop Professional Association Finder](#)
- [Wikipedia: Professional Associations in the U.S.](#)
- [American Society of Association Executives - Gateway to Associations](#)

Get Your Theater Ticket: Schedule Your Job Shadow Day

After identifying someone you hope to job shadow, send a letter or email. State your job shadow goals and share a little information about yourself. Provide several dates on which you're available, giving the person several weeks of lead time.

About a week after sending your correspondence, follow up with a phone call. Introduce yourself, make your request, and schedule a date. Discuss what you hope to gain from the shadow experience and listen to what activities your host suggests for the day.

The Performance: What to Do Before and During Your Job Shadow Experience

- If you haven't already done so, research the occupation, company, and its industry ahead of time.
- Prepare a list of questions you want to ask; bring the list with you.
- Prepare a brief [30-second introduction](#) about yourself and why you are shadowing.
- Dress appropriately for the workplace. You may want to ask your host about proper attire. Err on the conservative side.
- Arrive about 10-15 minutes early. Come ready to observe everything - interactions between people, the layout and look of the workplace, the range of jobs employees hold, and so on.
- As a courtesy, invite your host to lunch.
- Take lots of notes.
- Ask for a business card or write down the names, job titles, and email or mailing addresses of everyone who takes the time to talk with you.
- Send thank you notes or emails within 24 hours of your *visit* (whether it was in person or virtual / remote).



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- Last, but not least, assess whether you can see yourself in working in this role in the future!

Four-Star Reviews: Benefits of Job Shadowing

Job shadowing is a great way to shine the spotlight on a job and workplace. And the positive reviews don't end there! For instance, you can mention your job shadow experience on a resume or cover letter so that keywords are picked up by computerized resume systems, recruiters, and hiring managers. You can speak about job shadowing in an interview to showcase your curiosity and initiative to take the next steps in your career exploration.

What's more, networking and establishing relationships is at the heart of successfully navigating your career. Through job shadowing, you're creating the opportunity to meet with professionals who may ultimately become mentors (helping to direct and advise you about a career choice or change, or advancement in your professional life).

Once you know how to plan a job shadowing experience, repeat performances are easy. Use this Career Literacy™ competency to your advantage throughout your career.