

Recent Grads and Current Students Share Early Career Advice; Students and young professionals from WSJ's Noted. Advisers cohort on Jobs/Careers reveal what they learned about early career development during the pandemic

WSJ Noted. Advisers . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]. 11 Nov 2021.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

It's been nearly two years since Covid-19 first shut down offices across the country, sending workers and students to figure out their next steps from home without much of a transition. It's been a lot to navigate for everyone, but especially for those just starting out in their careers.

We asked the WSJ Noted. Advisers who took part in our recent Jobs/Careers cohort to reflect on the ways the pandemic has affected this stage of their career development.

Whether that is recenting your priorities, exploring new areas of interest or making sure you take every opportunity to network, our Advisers share suggestions that can be useful at any stage of college or early professional life. Their reflections, lightly edited, can be found below.

Ashley Lynn Priore, English & Politics, University of Pittsburgh, Class of 2022

The pandemic gave me more time to focus on projects I didn't have time to focus on before (specifically passion projects like writing and starting that new business proposal). In addition, it also allowed me time to read books I always said I would read. Now, with this newfound knowledge, I'm understanding where my true passions lie. Before Covid-19, I just focused on school and keeping up with my overflowing responsibilities, but now graduation is near and I'm networking more than ever before and finding jobs that truly fit into my passions. People need to network as much as possible and try different things.

Bailey Curtis, Product Manager, New York City

At the beginning of 2020, I had finally hit my professional stride. I was enjoying my job, embracing new challenges and fostering meaningful relationships in the office. A few months and a pandemic later, I found myself staring at my computer screen, wondering how my coworkers had transformed from constant beings in my day to Zoom squares. After the initial parade of virtual happy hours and town halls quieted down, I realized Covid-19 would be an indefinite presence in my life.

I decided to use the unexpected isolation to rethink what I wanted professionally. I defined measurable goals, sought out mentors and identified opportunities I might have been hesitant to pursue before. Over the next eighteen months, I built a toolkit composed of experience, coaching and a healthy dose of Ben and Jerry's. As a result, I recently secured a position in my desired field! I'm grateful for the career opportunities, but I'll always remember that this exploration was a privilege unavailable to many due to the life-altering hardships of Covid-19.

Carolina Williams, Marketing Analyst, Franklin, Tenn.

With office buildings, business travel and lunches with coworkers seemingly evaporating before me, so many things that at one time defined a job were no longer guaranteed. When it came to assessing what I desired for my first job, I discovered that I needed to focus on the kind of tools I would be utilizing and the kind of goals I would be striving toward within my work on a day to day basis, rather than the "extras."

What made the decision seem all the more weighty was partially the realization that, in the new age of remote work, my apartment would be the space filled with these instruments and aspirations. After experiencing great quantities of newfound free time at the beginning of the pandemic, I had also become much more cognizant of how I spent my time. This led me to more critically evaluate exactly what kind of work I could see myself devoting many hours to, and wanting to ensure that it would be engaging and rewarding. In these ways and more, the pandemic transferred my focus toward the "work" instead of the "job," and I will carry this perspective with me as I continue to grow in my career and evaluate future opportunities.

Cooper Stepke, Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, Class of 2023

Despite all the chaos wrought by the pandemic, it gave me a chance to stop, zoom out and reflect on my purpose in this world. Spending three consecutive semesters of school holed up in my bedroom opened my eyes to the reality of career development: Employers aren't waiting on you. Although in my naivety I assumed the professional world had stopped, I gradually realized it was actually the perfect time to begin putting myself out there. This taught me an important lesson, which is that there's never a better or worse time to embark on your career development path. No matter your lack of experience or ever changing interests, no one is waiting for you to get going. It's up to you to start.

Felipe Félix Méndez, International and Public Affairs, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Brown University, Class of 2022

A year and a half ago, like many other students and young professionals whose career plans were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, I felt stuck. Eventually, it became clear to me that the strategies and assumptions that I had previously relied on would not deliver the results that I hoped for in this new scenario. Thus, I decided to apply tools of design thinking to my professional development. The notion that I could build the career of my dreams by prototyping —finding "low-cost" ways to explore possible areas of interest —and making adjustments along the way helped me shift from seeing scarcity to seeing endless possibilities.

By leveraging informational interviews and building a portfolio, I prototyped being an independent college counselor, a corporate adviser on social impact-oriented issues, a journalist, a researcher, and a program administrator at a top university. These experiences helped me transition from feeling stuck to having a much clearer idea of what it would be like to hold five possible positions that I was interested in holding after college, not including all those that I prototyped through informational interviews. Furthermore, they helped me build a much more compelling career profile. Ultimately, applying design thinking enabled me to do things that seemed impossible a year before, such as joining the Atlantic Council as a Young Global Professional and later the Permanent Mission of Panama to the United Nations as an intern.

Isabel Baird, Communications Associate, New York City

The instability created by the pandemic caused me to re-evaluate my career goals and give up on some of my less practical career ambitions in favor of stability. When I was in college, I dreamed of going to graduate school to get a Ph.D. in History and pursuing a career in academia. But in many ways the pandemic has been a reckoning for higher education. I was forced to rethink my professional goals, and I realized that a stable job that allowed me to explore my interests and have an impact while living comfortably mattered to me more than pursuing a dream that was becoming less available and secure by the day. As such, I applied for corporate job opportunities very randomly, and stumbled into a job in communications that has allowed me to fulfill my passion for research and writing outside of academia.

Due to my change in goals, my approach to career development has become much more open-minded. While I'm very grateful to have a job I genuinely enjoy, I don't know what I want to be when I grow up. Instead of pursuing strategic, targeted career development opportunities, I try to talk with anyone I can about their fields to get a better sense of where I might want my career to go, and how I can get there.

Lori Sinanian, Social Media Manager, Los Angeles, Calif.

Searching for a job used to be a category in my planner under "Least Favorite Things." The pandemic, with its rare silver linings, challenged me to reframe the way I approach and think about the job-hunt process. What used to be

tedious and energy-draining has instead become a wise investment toward my future.

The job-hunt process is an important time dedicated to researching. If I find a job that interests me, even if my interest is only at 20%, I apply because I have simultaneously chosen to broaden my horizons by uncovering potential interests. I have also overcome the goal of achieving perfectionism when it comes to preparing my materials because everyone who receives my application will view it differently.

Mariam Khan, Liberal Arts, New York University, Class of 2024

Remote work has allowed me the opportunity to potentially work full-time as a student. I am no longer restricted to my home state or the country, as I can work remotely with companies around the world. During the pandemic, I've seen people's attitudes toward traditional work changing as well. People are switching jobs/careers or quitting them altogether to pursue other life interests. This uncertainty has made me think about what I want out of a future career. I have realized I, too, would benefit from pursuing numerous interests, rather than following one rigid path. Multiple paths allow me to gain skills in different fields, which gives me access to more job opportunities. Being a third culture kid, I have many past experiences that make up my identity, and I want my career to be reflective of them. That is why having all my interests and experiences pushed into one mold is not feasible. That's one thing the pandemic has been able to provide for – an opportunity to expand and grow.

Meghna Maharishi, Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, Class of 2022

I think the pandemic really put into perspective, in a sort of cheesy way, that time is precious. So, for a career, it made me realize that I should pursue something that I 1.) actually want to do and 2.) would make me happy. The pandemic has also taught me that networking and asking for what you want is so important. Before, I was always hesitant to reach out to people in industries I was interested in, partly because I didn't know how to start a conversation and didn't want the interaction to be solely transactional. During the pandemic, I found myself blindly applying to internship programs, hoping that maybe I'd luck out, a recruiter would look at my resume, and I'd get called for an interview. But given that recruiting timelines almost everywhere were delayed during the pandemic, that approach was really ineffective. I realized that I needed to be more upfront about what I want. Also, through talking to people in the industries I'm interested in, I've been able to learn what I want and what I don't want in a career.

Sarah Derris, Global Cultural Studies & Visual Media Studies, Duke University, Class of 2021

If nothing else, the pandemic has taught me that I have options; that there are endless opportunities to work for companies that align with my values, but that I don't have to make sacrifices to build and sustain a healthy career. When it comes to my own career, my hope for the future of office culture is a flexible hybrid model. Of course, developing and nurturing professional relationships is significantly more difficult to accomplish virtually, but with the majority of my interviewing and networking taking place online, connecting with people in my industry has never been easier and less daunting. Zoom meetings have supplanted more formal office visits and coffee chats, and while they may be tiresome, the advantage of connecting with people from anywhere remains. With most remote workers reporting feeling reluctant to return full time to the office, it appears that hybrid work models are here to stay for the time being.

Teresa Xie, Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, Class of 2022

At the beginning of 2020, I was a junior in college with plans to pursue a career in business. In particular, I was chasing after those highly sought-after consulting jobs that it seemed like everyone around me was gunning for. I knew consulting was a job I wasn't passionate about, but it just seemed like the most straightforward and stable path to take post-grad. Then, the pandemic hit. The pandemic's exposure of how fragile life can be made me deeply reflect on how I wanted to spend my time, and I realized that I wanted to take the risk of pursuing a career I was passionate about while still young, rather than one that did not particularly align with my beliefs or values, even if it was more stable. I had always been interested in arts and culture and writing, but never considered doing it realistically as a career until this point.

Pivoting from business to journalism changed my approach to career development in that it highlighted the importance of networking and talking to people in an industry I knew nothing about. During the pandemic, there

wasn't even an expectation to attend in-person networking events, which made talking to professionals I admired over the phone or on Zoom easier than ever. I incessantly messaged people on Twitter who worked at media companies I wanted to be at and to my surprise, most were more than willing to help. Quickly building my portfolio without many prior clips wouldn't have been possible had I not talked to those in the industry about what opportunities I should be looking for, who I should be in contact with, and what a career path in journalism looks like.

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Credit: WSJ Noted. Advisers

DETAILS

Subject:	Students; Design thinking; Professionals; Careers; Coronaviruses; Employment; Pandemics; Career development planning; COVID-19
Business indexing term:	Subject: Professionals Careers Employment Career development planning; Industry: 61143 : Professional and Management Development Training
Location:	New York City New York United States--US
Classification:	61143: Professional and Management Development Training
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y.
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Nov 11, 2021
column:	Noted Jobs
Section:	WSJ Noted
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
e-ISSN:	25749579
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2596032483

Document URL: <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/recent-grads-current-students-share-early-career/docview/2596032483/se-2?accountid=44910>

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Last updated: 2021-11-11

Database: U.S. Major Dailies

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