

# CAREER CHOICES MODULE

## Outcomes:

- Identification of what makes work valuable and positive—what to look for in a job.
- Understanding of the salary level required to maintain economic security.
- Familiarity with the basics of salary negotiation.
- Understanding of barriers to employment and how to overcome them.
- Understanding of how strongly higher education and training affects salary and career outlook.
- Understanding of career ladders, development of a personal career ladder and plan for climbing it.

## Overview

The Career Choices takes the rest of the economic empowerment curriculum to a new level, allowing participants to assess what it will take to realize their financial goals. The curriculum material was specifically designed address some of the barriers to getting and keeping a job, and to developing a job with potential for growth.

Unsurprisingly, members of underserved communities are those most likely to work in low-wage jobs. Women make up a greater share of the working poor than do men, probably because on average they earn lower wages and work fewer hours. Although women make up 47% of workers between the ages of 18 and 64, 56% of the working poor are women. Those who are not U.S. citizens are also disproportionately represented among the working poor. Fifteen percent of such workers live below poverty, and 30% live below 150% of the poverty level.

Working poverty affects people of color to a much greater extent than it does white Americans. A surprisingly large number of blacks and Hispanics work below the poverty level: 12% of all blacks who work fall below the poverty level, and 23% fall below 150% of the poverty level; 14% of working Hispanics live below the poverty level, and 29% fall below 150% of the poverty level.

The working poor are less likely to hold high school and college degrees. Eight percent of the working poor hold college degrees, compared to 26% of all workers. Although two-thirds of the working poor hold high school degrees, this proportion is much lower than the 88% for all workers. The consequence of not holding a high school degree is often poverty. Nineteen percent of workers who do not hold high school degrees fall below the official poverty level, and 34% fall below 150% of the poverty level. There is some evidence that the working poor are less likely to receive job training from their employers. The combination of less education and training compared to other workers makes it difficult for the working poor to climb out of poverty.

People face many hurdles in lifting themselves out of poverty including low wages, insufficient hours, layoffs, lack of skills, and health and other conditions that may limit the work performed. Thus, prescribing one solution is not likely to solve the problem of working poverty—we need higher wages *and* jobs that offer full-year employment, wage supplements such as the earned income tax credit, *and* access to services such as health care, childcare, and most income support.



Because many of the barriers to successful employment require interventions far beyond what a workshop facilitator can offer, we encourage facilitators to refer participants to one or many of the resources named in the career counseling handout--organizations and individuals specializing in work-readiness and self-assessment, who can provide the individualized assistance that is needed throughout the transition to work.

Because of the breadth of this topic and the range of existing materials available, we're limiting the scope of this module to the economic aspects of transitioning to work, and encourage participants to work with professionals on the self-assessment and job search processes.

(Data adapted from Marlene Kim's "Problems Facing the Working Poor" from *Balancing Acts*, Economic Policy Institute Library/Information Center, 2000)

### Considerations:

- It's likely that work histories and experience will vary widely within and between groups. Be sure to capitalize on the experiences of your participants—do NOT assume that their experience is limited to entry-level positions.
- Participants often require a lot of coaching and nudging to identify their skills and strengths. It may not just be modesty at work—participants could suffer from low self-esteem, and have long histories of underemployment. Be prepared to brainstorm with participants and identify attributes you've noticed through the workshop—"you're a great listener" "you have an amazing sense of style" "you speak another language!"
- Be sensitive when pushing participants to "dream big." It's important to get nursing assistants to think about becoming LPNs or RNs, but also to acknowledge that we need people at *every* rung of the career ladder to keep our society running. Present entry-level jobs as "first steps" —not "dead ends."
- This module emphasizes that education and training correlate with increased income. Welfare reform has made it harder for TANF recipients to complete education and training. The "work first" attitude held by DTA and some shelter staff can push TANF participants into low-wage jobs without addressing long-term career plans, the need for skill development, or barriers to employment. Participants receiving benefits—and/or living in shelter—may want to discuss their situations with a legal advocate to ensure that they "make the most" of what they are entitled to, and look at the pros and cons of working given their individual situations. See the handouts on structured job search (welfare and benefits module) for more details.
- In the process of establishing adult education goals, emphasize that identifying resources for childcare, financial aid, and other supports is an essential step. It's not enough to apply to school—one must have the supports in place to *stay in* school.
- Balancing work and family is especially challenging for those with limited income. Be sure to emphasize the importance of family-friendly environments with flexible hours, and other informal benefits that can "make or break" the transition to work.
- A somewhat delicate but important consideration: participants with criminal records may need to think about how their pasts influence career choices. A CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information) may be required for some positions such as firefighters, schoolteachers, or nurses. The CORI fact sheet at the end of the module can help get participants thinking about how to handle this issue.

## List of Activities in the Career Choices Module

ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION	TIME NEEDED
Defining Work	Discussion of what makes work valuable and positive.	10-15 min.
Job Training and Education	Discussion of the impact of job training and education on income.	10-15 min.
Career Ladders and Paths	Discussion and charting of individual career ladders.	20-25 min.
Skills Inventory	Individual self-assessment based on strengths and skills, followed by pair exercise.	25-30 min.
Likes and Dislikes: Hidden Keys to Your Happiness	Two worksheet-based self-assessment exercises based on past work experiences and hopes for future work experiences.	25-30 min.
Negotiating a Fair Salary	Discussion and role-play of salary negotiation.	15-20 min.

## List of Materials in the Career Choices Module

- Job Training Resources (Handout)
- Career Counseling Resources (Handout)
- Sample Career Ladders (Handout)
- My Career Ladder (Handout)
- Things I Like To Do And Things I Do Well (Activity Sheet)
- Likes and Dislikes: Hidden Keys to Your Happiness (Activity Sheet)
- Aspects of My Next Job... (Activity Sheet)
- Things that Make You Go Hmmm...Salary Negotiations Handout)
- Fact Sheet on CORI: Criminal Offender Record Information (Handout)

# CAREER CHOICES ACTIVITY #1

## Defining Work

### ***A. Objectives***

Participants identify the aspects of work they find valuable and positive.

### ***B. Time Needed***

10 to 15 minutes

### ***Description***

1. Generate, with participants, a definition of the word “work.” *Work is any activity necessary for the care of my family, my property, my friends, or me and any activity, which creates something of value to me or others.*
2. As a large group, ask participants can name elements that make a job “good work” (e.g. employee benefits, good co-workers). Write the elements on a flip chart. Make sure participants discuss employment benefits (including staff development, IRAs, vacation, health care, sick days, room for growth, family-friendly culture, etc.).
3. In pairs, ask participants to describe the best and worst work (paid and unpaid) that they or someone they know, have ever done. After their discussion, they should think more specifically about their individual personalities, preferences and needs. Ask them to reflect upon their experiences and fill out the handout. Clarify that it is elements of working conditions like “being left alone” or “interacting with people” that we want, not descriptions of actual jobs like “flipping hamburgers”.

## CAREER CHOICES ACTIVITY #2

### Job Training and Education

#### A. Objectives

- Participants see learning as a life-long process.
- Participants identify the link between training/education and increased income.

#### B. Time Needed

10 to 15 minutes

#### C. Materials

- *Boston Globe Careers Special Section* or comparable publication
- Handouts: “Job Training Resources”, “Career Counseling Resources”

#### Description

1. Before discussing possible job training and/or education paths, spend some time in the group discussion revisiting the question of *available time in one's life*, the demands and priorities. Participants will need to “claim their time” - they cannot be all things to all people. They will need to set priorities if they want to advance in their careers.
2. Discuss “The Right Track.” Advise participants to: choose a field that matches your likes and talents. Find the “hot tracks” - the most promising jobs in terms of available jobs and growth potential - in that field. Focus on the nature of the work, not the title. Interpersonal skills are always as important as technical skills. As a group, brainstorm some “dream careers” and discuss corresponding salaries, and the training/education needed. Use the newspapers/publications for reference.
4. Share the following statistics (source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000): a woman's median weekly earnings with no high school diploma is \$303. It rises to \$421 with a high school diploma, \$504 with some college or associate's degree; \$710 with a bachelor's degree; and \$890 with an advanced degree. Unemployment rates are lower for those with a college degree; 1.5% for those with a four year college degree compared to 11.7% without a high school diploma (Source: Karier, 1998.). Of the new jobs created between 1998-2008, 62% are expected to require an Associate's degree or higher. (Source: Bacon, 2000)
5. Distribute and review the handouts “Job Training Resources,” emphasizing the importance of choosing a reputable institution, and the risks associated with programs (such as those offered by many schools of aesthetics or secretarial skills), which require steep payments “upfront.” Distribute the handout “Career Counseling Resources” for follow-up and referral.

## CAREER CHOICES ACTIVITY #3

### Career Ladders and Paths

#### ***A. Objectives***

- Participants distinguish between jobs and careers.
- Participants determine what education; training or experience is required to “move up.”
- Participants chart their own career ladder.

#### ***B. Time Needed***

20 to 25 minutes

#### ***C. Materials***

Activity Sheets: “Sample Career Ladder”, “My Career Ladder”

Pencils

#### ***Description***

1. Discuss the difference between a job and a career, emphasizing that a series of jobs may develop into a career or career path.
2. Outline your own career path and/or ask participants to describe their own. What jobs have they held? Was the progression linear? Often people describe their careers in terms of “career webs” or “career wheels.” In the discussion, touch on the factors that trigger “career moves”: making a strategic “lateral move, “ “getting a foot in the door,” skill development, etc.
3. Present the concept of a career path: a series of opportunities for growth and learning, new responsibilities, and higher pay. Some examples of career paths (Source: [www.salary.com](http://www.salary.com)):

Position	Education/Training Required	Median Annual Salary
Accounting Clerk	High School Diploma	\$27,937
Bookkeeper	Associate's Degree	\$33,124
Accountant	Bachelor's Degree	\$38,710
Data Entry Clerk	HS Diploma	\$23,423
Receptionist	HS Diploma	\$26,175
Administrative Assistant	HS Diploma	\$38,719
Home Health Care Aide	HS diploma, cert. program	\$22,539
Licensed Practical Nurse	HS diploma, cert. program	\$37,792
Registered Nurse	Associate's degree, cert. Program	\$49,486
Nurse Practitioner	Advanced degree	\$70,205

4. Talk through several career ladders. Ask participants to fill out their own, helping them make realistic estimates about the time and training needed at each level.

## CAREER CHOICES ACTIVITY #4

### Skills Inventory

#### **A. Objectives**

- Participants identify existing skills and aptitudes (inherent abilities or traits).
- Participants translate these skills into possible careers to explore.

#### **B. Time Needed**

25 to 30 minutes

#### **C. Materials**

- Activity Sheet: “Things I Like to Do and Things I Do Well.”
- *Boston Globe* Careers Special Section (or any other publication that has information on salary, demand, growth opportunities for different careers)
- Pencils

#### **Description**

1. Distribute the activity sheet “Things I Like to Do and Things I Do Well,” and ask participants to think about things they like to do. This can include anything from building shelves, cooking, talking on the phone. Then ask them to think about things that they do well (whether or not they enjoy the activity) and personal characteristics or strengths they are proud of (example: great listener, patient). Things like cooking, fixing things, winning arguments, singing, writing, solving problems are just a few examples. There are no limits! Ask participants to write their responses in the appropriate column of the sheet.
2. Ask participants to pair off and help each other identify skills and qualities involved with doing those things they like. For example, someone may like to plan parties. The skills involved with party planning include time management, detail orientation, and advance planning.
3. Ask each pair to identify activities, or combinations of activities that could be developed into a paid job. Group similar categories together under flip chart headings. As a large group, discuss approximate salaries and necessary education or training for each of the occupations. This step is essential for connecting personal choices to income.
4. Using the *Job Market Analysis* or similar publication, participants can explore the careers they have identified. They should focus on the steps necessary to get there. Because many participants may not have thought about how much these jobs might pay, or may have unrealistic expectations about the salaries, this exercise often serves as a “reality check.” Be sure to discuss alternatives or intermediate steps towards participants’ goals.

## CAREER CHOICES ACTIVITY #5

### Likes and Dislikes: Hidden Keys to Happiness

#### ***A. Objectives***

- Participants identify the qualities they like and dislike in previous work experience.
- Participants identify the qualities they are and aren't willing to compromise on in future work experiences.

#### ***B. Time Needed***

25 to 30 minutes

#### ***C. Materials***

- Activity sheets: "Likes and Dislikes: Hidden Keys to Your Happiness" and "Aspects of My Next Job."
- Pencils

#### ***Description***

1. Ask participants to divide their work experience into short 3-5 year segments. It's easier to remember short, specific time frames than the entire past at once. Make sure they include volunteer work experience, and even hobby or sporting interests.
2. Distribute the activity sheets and ask participants to itemize the things they disliked about the job--and be as specific and detailed as possible. It's not too helpful to say, for example, "I disliked the people." That's much too general. It's more useful to say, "I disliked people who were pushy and rude." The categories on the handout can help get the group started. Since every job involves most of these items, ask them to include notes and comments about each.
4. Ask participants to review their lists and look for patterns. Someone might say, "I see I've always liked working on projects alone with no outside supervision. Therefore, I want to limit my people interaction in the future." Or someone could observe the opposite about herself: "I've never liked working on projects alone; I do best in a team-oriented environment."
5. Ask participants to consider what they want in their next job--and what they *don't want* in the future. Begin to determine what they *must have*--these are the absolute essentials-- then think about what would be fun, but perhaps frivolous. They should list these absolutes in the appropriate categories on the activity sheet.
6. Encourage participants to discuss their preferences with others to see what insights they have. Those who know us well often see connections we miss.

## CAREER CHOICES ACTIVITY #6

### Negotiating a Fair Salary

#### ***A. Objectives***

- Understand the process for salary research and negotiation.
- Practice salary negotiation.

#### ***B. Time Needed***

15 to 20 minutes

#### ***C. Materials***

Handout: “Things that Make You Go Hmmm ...”

#### ***Description***

1. Explain that talking about salaries can feel uncomfortable, but that it’s important. People at all stages of their careers need to know what the “going rate” is for the work they’re doing AND for the jobs they want to move into. Share that in this part of the course, the group will discuss how to find out what salary range is realistic, and how to negotiate an offer or raise.
  
2. Discuss and write down the different factors that influence how much someone gets paid. The list should include: the person’s years of experience, his/her credentials/degree, the nature of the job, the field of work, benefits, pay structure (including commission, bonuses and other “perks”). Make sure to include also, societal factors such as cost of living (which varies by city), economy (salaries rise during economic booms), and supply and demand for different jobs (for example, discuss how web designer salaries have fallen as a result of the dot-com bust).
  
3. Explain that one of the factors that most influences salary is the demands of the applicant. Employers want to pay as little as possible for our work. Unless we demonstrate “what we’re worth” and outright ask for a raise or higher salary, we are unlikely to get it. Talk about the factors that make this difficult (embarrassment, low self-esteem, modesty about our skills and accomplishments, fear of rejection).
  
4. Discuss the strategies for learning what the “going rate” is for different fields and jobs. The list should include informational interviewing, salary web sites, books, newspapers. Ask participants to identify the steps that happen before a job offer or raise is made. Walk through the order of events and the strategic moments for negotiation.
  
5. Distribute the handout “Things that Make You Go Hmm” which outlines the process of salary negotiation. Then role-play a scenario in which a job applicant negotiates a higher salary.