

# Job Shadowing Guidebook

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## What is Job Shadowing?

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You've begun to think about different career and job options. There are a lot of job titles that sound interesting but you don't really know what people in those jobs actually do. Perhaps you have a basic understanding of a field, but you'd like more in-depth, insider knowledge about the day-to-day realities. Even after doing some research, you probably still have many unanswered questions: What is a typical work day like? What is graduate school like? What kind of work-life balance does a career provide? Does a position involve working more with people or information? Does a specific workplace have a healthy culture?

Job shadowing is a way for you to answer these questions and more. Job shadowing is a learning opportunity in which you spend a short time period (from part of a day to several days) accompanying, interviewing and observing an experienced worker at their workplace in order to get first-hand information about a profession.

In arranging a job shadow, your responsibilities are to:

- Prepare for the job shadowing experience ahead of time, including researching the organization you will be visiting, making a list of questions to ask, and brainstorming learning activities to do during the job shadow
- Let your job shadow host know about any expectations you have ahead of time
- Attend your arranged job shadow
- Be professional and polite
- Respect workplace restrictions and confidentiality
- Send a thank-you note after the job shadow

## Why Do Job Shadowing?

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Job shadowing is a chance to test drive a potential career option with minimal time commitment or risk. By doing a job shadow you will:

- **Get first-hand, realistic information about a career or field** – details like working conditions, earnings and trends can help inform your career decisions.
- **See if the realities of a job fit with your interests, skills, and values** – do you like to work alone or with others, indoors or outdoors, with people or information, early or late in the day? How does the reality of a position compare with what you previously envisioned?
- **Evaluate your academic plan** – are you on the right track with the academic program you are in, or do you want to try some classes in another faculty, change your major, or apply for graduate studies? Can you apply your degree in a way that you have not previously considered?
- **Discuss how to deal with potential career barriers and challenges** – from disclosing sexuality in the workplace to accommodating disabilities, you can search for potential job shadow hosts who are comfortable discussing sensitive topics that matter to you.
- **Practice communicating and sharing information about yourself in a low-stress situation** – this is great practice for job interviews, or other interactions with potential employers at career fairs, networking events, and so on.



- **Create and take advantage of hidden opportunities** – by discussing your interests and aspirations with a job shadow host, you may learn about new programs, theories and practices; perhaps you can generate an entirely new position that uses your unique skills to fill a need in an organization.
- **Build your professional network** – whether or not positions are advertised, contacts you make through job shadowing can influence hiring decisions by informing you about and recommending both advertised and unadvertised positions.

## Job Shadowing vs. Career Information Interviewing

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Career information interviewing is a brief method of gathering first-hand information and advice about career options by talking to people about their individual career paths, jobs, industries, or work settings. The purpose of career information interviews is not to ask for or get a job. Generally, career information interviews are:

- Brief, 20 to 30 minute meetings
- Preferably in person at a contact's workplace (although phone and email interviews are possible)
- Focused on specific questions you prepare ahead of time regarding the contact's career path, job, industry, or work setting
- Have intentions very similar to job shadowing

A job shadow is like an extended career information interview, with the additional benefits of hands-on learning activities, ample time for observation and networking, and in-depth understanding of day-to-day workplace realities.

Whether or not you do job shadowing or career information interviews will depend on the time you have available, how much and what kind of information you hope to gather, and whether or not the individual, organization or field you are interested in is open to the greater commitment of a job shadow.

## The Job Shadow Process\*

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### ***Step 1: Identify careers, jobs, industries, or work settings you are interested in learning more about***

You may already have some areas of interest, but this is a chance to explore all of your options with minimal risk – if you are thinking about applying to veterinary school or completing a degree in industrial design, investigate both.

Research, research, research! Even if you already know which careers or fields interest you, you still should gather more in-depth information *before* talking to anyone in person:

- Use the Career Centre Career Resource Centre to access resources such as industry guides and books outlining careers associated with specific academic majors. Search the Career Centre's holdings using the online Career Resource Centre catalogue at [www.uab.ca/cc](http://www.uab.ca/cc).
- Attend a Career Centre career fair, career forum, or Career Chat to learn from, meet, and network with professionals of various backgrounds.
- Review organization and professional association websites, including specialized professional associations for marginalized groups such as women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, sexual minorities, visible minorities, and so on. (E.g. National Gay and Lesbian Journalists' Association).
- Look at the web pages of university departments, faculties, and alumni groups to see if there are lists or mention of jobs held by past graduates.



- Browse the Internet and review current news for political, social, and economic factors that may be affecting the labor market and specific industries.

Researching potential careers and fields will help you learn what types of positions/job titles you'll need to search for in order to find the right job shadow hosts. It will also focus the questions you ask your hosts. People are generally interested in talking about what they do, but don't waste their time or yours by asking questions that could have been easily answered elsewhere.

***Step 2: Identify your beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties about each area of career interest. Clarify what you want to learn from a job shadow.***

When you are considering a particular career, job, industry, or work setting, you have probably already made some (often implicit) assumptions about the work, compensation, areas of satisfaction, and so on. Some of these assumptions will be accurate and others won't be. One of the goals of job shadowing is to explore, question, and validate these beliefs before making any significant career decisions.

For each area of career interest, ask yourself:

“What *positive* beliefs/assumptions do I have concerning this career/job/industry/work setting?”

“What *negative* beliefs/assumptions do I have concerning this career/job/industry/work setting?”

“What *uncertainties and unknowns* do I have concerning this career/job/industry/work setting?”

Are there specific skills, knowledge, attitudes or connections you hope to enhance through a job shadow? Ask yourself: What would I know after a job shadow that I don't know now? What would I be able to do? How would I be different from how I am now?

***Step 3: Translate your beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties into specific questions and learning activities***

Make a list of questions that will best help you answer the personal beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties you identified in Step 2. See the list of sample questions at the end of this guide.

Think of learning activities you could do with a job shadow host. The opportunity to have extensive exposure to a work environment is what makes a job shadow so unique; take full advantage of the time. Having concrete ideas for how to fill the job shadow time may also be helpful in persuading an individual to let you job shadow them.

Sample ideas for a job shadow:

- Discuss your host's career path, work experience and educational background
- Do a tour of the workplace and facilities
- Observe and accompany your host on their daily activities
- Meet with and interview some of your host's coworkers (particularly those in different work areas and/or at different stages of their careers) to get a broader perspective of the field or organization
- Read organizational documents or reports
- Sit in on meetings or presentations
- Have lunch with your host and their coworkers
- Try appropriate hands-on activities
- Debrief with your host



#### **Step 4: Conduct the job shadow**

##### **a) Identify individuals**

Think about any specific criteria you have when looking for individuals you'd like to job shadow:

- Educational background: degrees earned, schools attended, formal and informal training
- Professional experience: current and past positions, involvement in associations, length of career, specific employers, seniority
- Approachability, accessibility, willingness to arrange a meeting
- Knowledge or expertise: currentness of information, awareness of trends and future prospects, reputation
- Demographics: age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, country of origin, and other personal or background factors

Similar to doing research about a career or field, there is a range of methods to identify job shadow hosts:

- Participate in the Career Centre's Job Shadow Week – this involves people who have signed up specifically to offer job shadows to U of A students and alumni. View the list of job shadow hosts online, search for individuals based on your identified criteria, and apply. NOTE: Job Shadow Week only occurs once per year during February's Reading Week; applications are available on the Career Centre website at [www.uab.ca/cc](http://www.uab.ca/cc) and are generally due in January.
- Ask everyone you know for contacts, including your professors, supervisors, friends, and family members: this is networking! You might want to ask:

“Do you know someone who *is like this?*”

“Do you know someone who *does this?*”

“Do you know someone who *would know someone like this?*”

- Use the Career Centre Career Resource Centre to check out industry-specific and general directories, either in person at the Career Centre or online at [www.uab.ca/cc](http://www.uab.ca/cc).
- Attend a Career Centre career fair, career forum, or Career Chat that features presenters with the criteria you are looking for.
- Look at the web pages for university departments, faculties, and alumni to see if past graduates are mentioned, whom you can then look up and contact.
- Review company and professional association websites, including specialized professional associations for marginalized groups such as women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, sexual minorities, visible minorities, and so on. (E.g. National Gay and Lesbian Journalists' Association). You can contact an individual in a company or ask a professional association to refer you to someone with a particular background.

##### *Special Considerations:*

It is important to remember that some organizations or fields will not be amenable to job shadowing. For example, it would be very rare to be able to fully job shadow a psychologist by sitting in on counselling sessions, due to client confidentiality. Unionized work environments may not be able to offer job shadowing due to collective agreement provisions.

In addition, some organizations or fields may require additional paperwork and clearances before allowing a job shadow. For example, a Police Information Check (aka criminal record check) and Child Intervention Record Check (aka child welfare check) may be required in order to job shadow someone who works with children or vulnerable adults. Both take several weeks to be processed, so arrange your job shadow date accordingly. You must pay a fee for Police Information Checks in Edmonton.

##### **b) Persuade yourself to make contact**



Contacting individuals you don't know can be intimidating. But remember that it will get easier with practice and the worst they can say is 'no'! See some sample introductions at the end of this guide.

Be clear about what you are asking for. Prepare a point-form introduction that includes:

- Your name and academic program
- Your connection to the person (how you heard of them or anyone you know in common)
- Details about yourself, your situation, and how it relates to the person you're calling
- The purpose of your call (i.e. to arrange a job shadow), including how much time you'll need, what kind of information you're looking for, and what you hope to see, hear or try during a job shadow
- Arrange the time, date, and location of a job shadow

It can take some time to actually make contact with a busy professional, and more time to schedule an actual meeting, but don't be discouraged. Here are some tips for making initial contact:

- When requesting a job shadow, it can be very helpful to email first and then phone to discuss. This provides the potential host with a context for your phone call, and lets them think about job shadowing rather than deciding on the spot during a call. In the email, make your intentions clear and write that you will be phoning to follow up and discuss further. You may say that you'll phone on a specific day or 'in the next few days.' Then make sure you do it!
- Success at reaching your potential job shadow host can increase when you phone first thing in the morning, immediately after lunch, or late in the afternoon.
- Don't assume that because you have reached the person on the phone that they have time to talk at that moment; briefly explain your purpose and allow them time to think about your job shadow inquiry before making a decision.
- You may choose to contact the Human Resources department and ask to job shadow someone in the organization. Getting a referral to someone from Human Resources can be helpful if you can't find individual employee names/contact information or don't know what positions exist in the organization. However, it is important to keep in mind that sometimes you will have more success contacting a potential job shadow host individually and directly rather than going through a Human Resources department.
- A potential host may be intimidated by the length of a job shadow. They may wonder what to do with you or show you for a whole work day. Suggest sample learning activities as noted in Step 3, or propose a half-day rather than a full day job shadow. Being clear on what you hope to learn, try or do will also reassure them that you have put thought into the process and won't be wasting their time.
- If you were referred to the person, always mention who referred you – whether you are leaving a message with an assistant or on voicemail, this can increase the likelihood of the person calling you back.
- If you have left an initial voicemail or email and haven't heard back from a person, it is generally good practice to wait *at least one week* before trying to re-contact them.
- You may wonder how many times you should try to contact someone before giving up. There is no right answer to this question. It is important to keep in mind different factors that may delay someone in returning your call or email. Check to see if there are large events (such as a fundraiser) being hosted by the organization around the time you are trying to contact them; certain professions might also be cyclically busy, such as accountants during tax season. Finally, be sure to listen closely to voicemail messages, as they often indicate if a person is away from work for a period of time.



- Troubleshooting: What if the person says:

*“I can answer your questions right now.”*

Acknowledge the offer, but try to arrange an in-person job shadow at their workplace if possible. Emphasize that the meeting will be at their convenience and that part of your learning will come from actually visiting the workplace (such as being able to observe the physical work environment, practice interacting in a professional setting, and getting a sense of the organizational culture). Give them ideas for learning activities you can do during a job shadow that make it such a valuable learning experience.

*“No.” or “I’m too busy.”*

Thank them for their time, and ask for a referral to another person (inside or outside the organization) who might be able to meet with you. Propose a half-day rather than a full day job shadow. Or, you may try to schedule a shorter 20 to 30 minute career information interview rather than a job shadow. If it doesn’t work out, don’t take it personally – it’s all part of the process.

*“We are not hiring.”*

Emphasize that you aren’t looking for a job. Rather, you are doing research about your career options.

*“Our organization doesn’t allow job shadows because of confidentiality, sensitive materials, union rules, etc.”*

Remember that some organizations or fields may not be amenable to job shadowing. Respect the limits expressed by a potential host. You may try to schedule a shorter 20 to 30 minute career information interview rather than a job shadow.

Here is a checklist of factors to clarify with your host before the job shadow:

- Arrival and end time
- Kind of clothing to wear (i.e. business casual)
- Location of the job shadow
- Parking or transit information
- Lunch information (i.e. bring or buy lunch on site)
- Potential activities or plans the host is thinking of
- Your specific goals; what you’d like to see, hear and try
- Paperwork required ahead of time (i.e. Police Information Check)

### **c) Do the job shadow**

Success! You have arranged a date, time, and location for a job shadow, and now all that’s left is to do it. Here are some tips for doing the actual job shadow:

- Thoroughly research the organization before the job shadow; review their website and read available documents.
- Don’t ask for a job during the process, even indirectly.
- Wear clothing appropriate to the work environment; this may mean wearing business casual clothing. Leave a good impression.



- Bring a list of questions with you. Make notes of peoples' answers (it's okay to make notes while they are talking – just let them know that's what you are doing).
- Take initiative during the process. *You* arranged the job shadow, so *you* need to ask the questions and be clear about what you want to learn and experience.
- Arrive on time and leave on time, unless you are clearly invited to stay longer.
- Practice good listening skills. Let your job shadow host do most of the talking.
- Observe the workplace environment:
  - How are people dressed (formal, informal, uniform)?
  - How visibly diverse is the work setting (age, gender, ethnicity)?
  - How do staff members interact with one another? Is there a hierarchy?
  - What is the atmosphere like (calm, fast-paced, stressful, tense)?
  - How were you treated when you arrived?
  - Do people appear to enjoy working there?
  - What kinds of workspaces are there (cubicles, offices, open layout)?
- Respect confidentiality. Reflect on the appropriateness of disclosing the information your job shadow host has shared with you.
- Remember the information you collect is only one person's opinion, and not necessarily representative of the perspectives of everyone in the field. Doing multiple job shadows or career information interviews is your best strategy to make sure you get well-rounded answers to your questions.
- If there is any way you can help your job shadow host, offer to do so and make sure you follow through. This may involve sending them an interesting article, relevant information, or the name of one of your contacts. Networking is a two-way relationship; the more you can reciprocate with information or resources, the stronger your network will be.
- Get a business card from your job shadow host and others you meet during the process. You may want to make your own two-sided promotional business card to give to new contacts. Include your:
  - Name and contact information (phone number and professional-looking email address)
  - Job objective, degree, other qualifications, relevant skills, or accomplishments
- Leave with 1 to 2 referrals for other people in the field you can talk to.
- Keep organized records of your job shadow process (including names, dates, notes about the meeting and workplace, and follow-up actions taken). This will help you remember details later when you reflect about what you've learned – plus it's just good organizational practice.

**d) Follow up with your job shadow host**

It is very important to express your gratitude after a job shadow, particularly since they ask a great deal of time and effort from hosts. There are four parts to following up with a job shadow host:

- i. Send a thank-you note within 24 hours of the job shadow. This can be a letter, card or email. Comment on how the experience expanded your knowledge of the field and note the follow-up steps you plan to take as a result. See a sample at the end of this guide.



- ii. If you said you would do something for your job shadow host (such as email them an article, refer them to a website, or give them the name of a relevant contact), make sure you do it. This can be included in your thank-you note.
- iii. If you talk to someone your job shadow host referred you to, or pursue an activity they suggested (such as attending a meeting or reading certain materials), follow up again with an update email.
- iv. Build your network by maintaining contact with anyone you have a job shadow with. Let them know if you have any career news to share, such as finding a position, deciding on an educational program, changing your degree, or other news that relates to your career development.

### ***Step 5: Reflect on what you've learned***

Look back at your original career beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties and the questions you based on them. Compare the beliefs, assumptions, and uncertainties you had before the job shadow(s) with what you learned as a result of your job shadow(s).

Ask yourself:

“Have I asked the right questions to get the information I originally wanted? Are there new questions I need to investigate now?”

“Have any of my original beliefs and assumptions been validated? Invalidated?”

“How does what I learned about the career/job/industry/work setting relate to my own career-related values and priorities?”

“What is my gut feeling or intuition about this particular career/job/industry/work setting?”

“What implications does this have for me?”

“What should I do or think as a result of the information I have gathered?”

Sometimes the job shadow process reveals that you do not really want the career you had always planned on. It is normal for this realization to make you feel uncertain or disappointed. Fortunately, it is usually better to find this information out sooner rather than later.

Now you can use this opportunity to:

- Begin the job shadow process anew, looking for new career options to focus on.
- Conduct shorter 20 to 30 minute career information interviews with individuals in areas of interest.
- Meet with a Career Centre career advisor to discuss how you are feeling and try out different career exploration strategies.
- Talk with an academic advisor about your academic options and their implications, including trying new classes, changing your major, or pursuing further studies.
- Get involved with non-academic activities to find out about alternative and hidden career options, get a better sense of your old and new interests, and expand your network – this might include volunteering in the community, involvement with student groups on campus, paid work, or travelling.



## Sample Questions to Ask a Job Shadow Host

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- Can you describe a typical work day or week? Does your work change during the year?
- What do you like best about your job/field/work setting?
- What are the sources of stress in your job?
- If you could, what would you change about your job?
- What values are important in your career/field/industry/work setting/team?
- What makes someone successful in your work?  
(Listen for key skill words; you may need to develop these skills or highlight them on your resume.)
- How did you get involved in this type of work? What is your educational background? Is there a specific educational or professional background needed to enter this field?
- How did you learn to do your work? If you were starting out in your field now, how would you train?
- How do you keep current in your field? What should I be reading? Are there formal or informal training opportunities?
- Do people in your field belong to professional associations or organizations? What are the benefits? Do you think it would make sense for me to attend a meeting?
- In what industries and companies would careers and jobs such as yours exist?
- How did you get your job(s)? Are there any job search methods you would recommend?
- What is the compensation range and benefits for a typical job in this field?
- Does this job require/allow, for example:
  - travel/relocation
  - overtime/evening/weekend/shift work
  - working primarily with people (individuals, groups) or alone
- How would you describe the work-life balance? Flexibility? Balancing work with child/elder care?
- Looking back, is there anything you wish you'd known or that you would do differently?
- Can you suggest one or two other people I might contact? May I use your name if I contact them, to explain how I got their name?

Depending on your job shadow host, it may be appropriate to ask some personal questions. If you have a good reason to believe your job shadow host would be comfortable addressing them, you may consider questions such as:

- Are you out at work [regarding sexuality or gender identity]? Do you have advice for coming out at work?
- What advice do you have for disclosing a disability at work? Negotiating accommodations?



- Have you had to deal with discriminatory or racist actions/comments from co-workers or clients? What advice do you have for dealing with it?
- What is it like being a man/woman in a female/male-dominated field?

## Sample Networking Materials

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### Sample Email Introduction:

Subject line: *Request for career advice*

*Dear Ms. Contact:*

*I obtained your name from Abe Perry, Career Advisor at the University of Alberta Career Centre. I am writing to you because I am in the process of exploring possible career options, and your position as a Volunteer Coordinator with the Public Ecology Centre sounds very intriguing to me.*

*I am currently in my final year of a Sociology degree at the University of Alberta, and I have recently started volunteering with the Environmental Brigade on campus. I am interested in learning more about how you became a Volunteer Coordinator, what it is like working in the non-profit sector, and any career advice you have for a new grad interested in the environmental field.*

*I am wondering if it be possible for me to job shadow you at your organization. This would involve me accompanying and observing you in order to get first-hand information about your position. I have some specific ideas for things I'd like to see and try. I will contact you in the next few days to discuss this possibility. You are also welcome to contact me in the meantime at 780-555-1234.*

*Sincerely,  
Nita Path*



### Sample Phone Introduction:

(Note: On the phone, you shouldn't just read a script such as the one below. Make some key points to remember, and then be flexible and natural in speaking with your potential job shadow host. Allow back-and-forth dialogue.)  
*"Hello Ms. Contact. My name is Nita Path, and I am a Sociology student at the University of Alberta. I got your name from Abe Perry, a Career Advisor at the Career Centre here at the U of A."*

(pause, back-and-forth discussion)

*"I am doing research to explore potential career options, and your position as a Volunteer Coordinator sounds really interesting. I am wondering if it would be possible for me to job shadow you to see what it's like to work in your field."*

(pause, back-and-forth discussion)

*"Job shadowing would involve me accompanying and observing you at your workplace for a day. It could involve me sitting in on meetings and talking to you and your co-workers about your careers. Please take some time to think about it and let me know what you think."*

### Sample Thank-You Email:

(Note: It can be appropriate to use your job shadow host's first name in a follow-up context, particularly if they invited you to use their first name during your job shadow.)

Subject line: *Thank you*

*Dear Neuva,*

*Thank you for allowing me to job shadow you at the Public Ecology Centre. I really appreciate the time you took to discuss opportunities in the environmental field. It was great to hear about the unexpected twists and turns in your path to becoming a Volunteer Coordinator, and it really emphasized for me how important it is to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise.*

*I particularly enjoyed attending the Board Development conference call and meeting with policy analysts Tim and Marie. I will definitely follow through on your suggestion to contact the Environmental Coordinator at Energy Enterprise, and I will be sure to keep you informed of my progress. I have also attached the journal article we discussed – I hope it is of some interest and use to you.*

*Thank you again for sharing your time and advice.*

*Sincerely,  
Nita Path*



*\*The Career Centre would like to thank Dennis R. Laker for generously allowing contents to be adapted from his original publication:*

Laker, D. R. (2002). The career wheel: An exercise for exploring and validating one's career choices. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 39(2), 61-72.

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For additional job search advice and career-related topics, the U of A Career Centre offers Guidebooks for *Career Information Interviewing*, *Job Shadowing*, *Personal Statements*, and *Reference Letters*. These [publications](#) are available for download on our website, as well as in print format in our Career Centres on the U of A Campus.

The Job Search Guidebook was originally developed as part of the [Transition to Career](#) (T2C) elearning modules. For more information on T2C, visit the U of A Career Centre website

Are you a U of A student returning to school in the following Fall/Winter semester? Are you interested in working as a Career Peer Educator (CPE)? Find more information about the position and how and when to apply on the CPE program webpage <https://www.ualberta.ca/career-centre/about-us/cpe>

