

## College Admissions: Job Shadows

A job shadow is where you spend a full day with someone who does work that is potentially interesting to you. You see what a “day on the job” is like for that person. Most high school students don’t have any way to know what it is really like to be an engineer or graphic designer or nurse, yet many colleges ask students to indicate a potential major/career.

I am a huge believer in the value of job shadows. If you spend a day with someone and discover that the work is boring, that time was not a loss. Perhaps it allows you to cross a potential career off your list, and knowing what you don’t want to do is valuable information. If you do a job shadow and are super-excited by what you observe, you can ask your host about ways to connect with others in the field and perhaps find an internship.

Make a list of careers that sound interesting to you. You can research more about them using the career exploration resources on my website. If you still find the field appealing after your initial research, then set up a job shadow. How do you do that?

First, use your family and friends. Ask your parents or friends’ parents if they know anyone in the field you want to explore whom they would feel comfortable introducing you to. All you need is an email introduction. Your parents or friends should not make job shadow arrangements for you—that’s your task! If you are unsuccessful at finding someone in a career that interests you, please send me an e-mail and I will try to find you a connection.

Next, reach out to the person and explain who you are and that you are interested in a job shadow. Prepare a list of days when you do not have school and would be available to do the job shadow. Spring break and summer vacation are ideal. Make sure you have available transportation so you can be on time. Ask what you should wear, and be sure to follow the guidance you get. Bring a packed lunch and some snacks, since you want to be energetic the whole day.

Your host is doing you a favor, so be sure to act respectful and appropriate. If you are unsure whether certain behavior is okay, just ask! Be prepared with a list of questions such as these:

- How long have you been working in this career?
- Why did you choose it?
- What kind of education did you need to get started?
- What types of continuing education have you had as your career progressed?
- What do you like best about your work?
- What do you like least about your work?
- What is a typical day like? Will I be experiencing a typical day with you, or is there something out of the ordinary today?
- What percentage of your work is done alone, and what percentage of your work is done in collaboration with others?
- With which other types of professionals are you in daily contact?
- Are there any trends that are strongly affecting your work? If so, what are they?
- What are the most critical skills to have in order to be successful in your work?

- If your job has a normal career path, please describe how most people start, the various jobs along the way as they advance, and the usual amount of time in each position.
- What would a starting salary be like for someone straight out of college, and what would be a usual salary range for someone competent with ten years of experience?
- What advice would you give me if I am interested in pursuing this career?

Take good notes as your questions are answered. Be sure to take the business card of your host and send a handwritten thank-you note the next day. It is also polite to send a thank-you card to the person who connected you with the job shadow (if it wasn't your parents).

Some professions do not allow job shadows because of privacy or security reasons, so a back-up option to learn more would be to meet the person for an hour and do an informational interview in which you ask questions about his/her job.

I recommend that you complete eight job shadows before the start of senior year. I do not expect job shadows to result in a definite career decision, but they do help you narrow your options. The average college student changes majors three times, and you may too; however, the more you know about yourself and what careers might use your strengths, the more likely you are to find colleges classes and majors that excite you, and the more likely you are to actually graduate in four years.