

10 Lessons I Wish I Knew About Career Planning in My 20s

1. Your First Job Won't Define Your Entire Career

At 22, I thought my first job title would shape everything after it. Truth is, most people change industries, roles, and even entire career paths multiple times. Your first job is a learning experience - not a lifelong sentence. Focus on gaining skills, building relationships, and figuring out what you don't want as much as what you do.

2. Skills Matter More Than Job Titles

It's easy to chase shiny titles, but the market values what you can do - not what your business card says. Prioritize learning transferable skills: writing, problem-solving, communication, project management, and digital literacy. These compound over time and open up far more doors than any specific title.

3. Don't Obsess Over a 10-Year Plan

It's good to have direction, but the world (and your interests) change quickly. Instead of rigid long-term plans, think in 1- to 2-year sprints. Ask yourself: What do I want to learn next? What problems do I want to solve? Where do I want to grow? Then adjust as life and opportunities evolve.

4. Networking Isn't Sleazy - It's Strategic

In your 20s, networking often feels like forced small talk. But the best career moves often come from weak ties and conversations that aren't about getting something, but about learning and connecting. People are more generous than you think - especially if you're curious and respectful.

5. Invest in Yourself Before You Think You're "Ready"

Courses, certifications, conferences - they feel expensive when you're early in your career. But the ROI can be huge. Don't wait for permission or the "perfect moment." Upskilling is a form of career

insurance.

6. It's Okay to Outgrow a Job (or Industry)

Staying in a role too long out of comfort or loyalty can quietly stall your growth. If you're no longer learning, your values have shifted, or you feel stagnant, it's okay to move on. Growth often means discomfort.

7. Money Matters - But It's Not the Only Thing

In your 20s, financial independence is a major goal. That's valid. But choosing a job only for the paycheck can burn you out fast. Balance compensation with learning potential, work-life balance, and alignment with your long-term goals.

8. Rejection Is Redirection

Rejection stings - whether it's a failed interview or a promotion you didn't get. But each "no" usually points you toward something better. Learn to take feedback, adapt, and move forward. Every successful person has a string of rejections behind them.

9. Your Career Is Yours - Not Your Parents', Not Society's

There's a lot of pressure to pursue "safe" or prestigious paths. But only you have to live with your choices. Don't let expectations dictate your career. Tune into what excites, energizes, and challenges you - not just what looks good on paper.

10. Be Kind to Yourself - You're Learning

You will make mistakes. You will question yourself. You might even feel lost. That's not failure - it's growth. Your 20s are for exploring, building a foundation, and learning who you are in the world of work. Give yourself grace.

Final Thoughts

Career planning in your 20s is less about having a perfectly paved path and more about staying curious, intentional, and adaptable. Don't rush. Don't compare. And don't forget - it's not just a career you're building, it's a life.