

WHAT OUR
ALUMNI
HAVE SHARED
ABOUT
WORKING IN
CD

What does the work look like?

I love this question because before I'd worked in the industry I always wanted to ask someone "what does your work week look like?" but I was always too chicken to ask. Maybe now I can answer the question for someone else who's feeling chicken!

My work week tends to involve a mix of the following:

- Research, research, research: I'm in a program that's very new and so a lot of my time is spent trying to find out what's happening out there. I read a lot of reports (government reports, annual reports from other organisations), I read academic articles, I read newspaper articles from the communities I work in, I listen to radio and podcasts about the issue (rural suicide & mental health), I go to community events and listen to what's being said, I ask other industry contacts what they're seeing and doing.
- Talking, talking, talking: I still can't quite get over the fact that I'm essentially being paid to chat and brainstorm.

My paid work is very different to my volunteer work. My paid work is in mental health/suicide prevention and is primarily sector development, training, providing policy recommendations, writing submissions, sitting on reference groups - anything to influence change at a high up level. Much of my day job isn't really community work as in on the ground interacting with people, but I know if it all works out the way it should, it will eventually influence change downstream and improve people's wellbeing....

On the other hand, the volunteer unpaid work that I do is grass roots community development. Really this is the driver that keeps me motivated to do the high level policy stuff. I developed my own community organisation that does things the way that I think all good community organisations should (but often don't) Essentially, I saw a need, gathered with others, and build something together. This is now financially sustainable through donations, but doesn't pay the bills. I hope that one day that this might be my full time paid gig.

I am very conscious of not taking on too many extra roles that would both stretch me thin AND disempower the incredible people that are already doing the work. I find my self being present and observing communities. I find myself in governance/confidence spaces where often my expertise is asking strategic questions that leads to more collective group analysis and possibilities. I find I'm finding myself participating and contributing to discussions by sharing stories and models that I have learned at in other spaces.

In my professional role (the one that pays my rent) I'm currently doing a lot of event management work. It's logistics, picking up the telephone, sending confirmation emails and proofreading for cultural appropriateness and accuracy/details. There's an element of strategic/cultural advising and stakeholder analysis. Strategic opportunities means a lot of background reading, consulting with trusted advisors and my own personal networks for advice. Finding my place in the team means I'm working with a lot of anxious detail people and i have become the designated extrovert so I bring a lot of enthusiasm, can do and 'can't we just call and ask?' type of attitudes. Facilitating community meetings is not something that the team has done before so I'm really driving the popular/grassroots processes for effective and ethical consultation.

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Busy, adaptable, and value driven

My foray into the development space is not a traditional one. I came to the Master of Development Practice with 8 years of community-based environmental education experience in the Caribbean. I was seeking an avenue in my studies that would allow me to connect to the varied experiences I had just left so I could make a 'smoothish' transition back to Australia. The work then was busy, no set schedule of hours, where my life was the work and my friends associated me with the work.

I raised funds (most of the time in the early years), did presentations in schools, businesses, and in community halls, worked with community groups to develop their own environmental programmes and organised lots of events - both as fundraising and as outreach. It was a very busy time. Short answer - it's busy and you need to be committed to the cause of the work, align it to your values, otherwise it will feel like it is an intrusion on your 'outside of work' life.

How do you find work?

Job Search

I applied for my current position through a graduate program which was encouraged through my networks. My 'job search' was basically flicking periodically through seek, linked-in etc but I found that I mostly told people that I'd graduated, looking for work and I was often asked for my resume by community organisations that were present at the events I go to in my everyday life.

There is always work to be done. I remind people periodically on team 'protect the light' that there's a LOT of work to be done.

Good ol' Ethical Jobs & Seek

Because I'm new to working in the CD world, I've relied heavily on jobseeking websites like Seek and Ethical Jobs to find work. I've also found that making sure my industry contacts know I'm looking for work is a valuable strategy because they're able to send me information about jobs that aren't being publicly advertised - and oh my goodness are there plenty of those fellas around. I would also say that if there are specific organisations you want to work for, regularly check their career pages because plenty of times I've found jobs that are advertised on their websites but not on Seek or Ethical Jobs or other jobseeking sites. Just be proactive, look everywhere, speak to everyone. I'd also say that finding work takes a lot of patience and can be a mentally and emotionally draining experience, so make sure you're taking care of yourself and staying away from the negative self-talk that can start sneaking in after a couple of rejection emails or phonecalls.

By not being strategic


Well, I guess a little bit strategic, but mostly I have just done things that seem interesting and that I enjoy and then figured out each next step. I also ask a lot of people who I admire about their career paths, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly. I take on small projects even if they don't seem like something I think I want to do forever as often one thing leads to another. When I realised that the work that is closest to my heart isn't necessarily in Australia, I started by looking elsewhere. I used [idealists.org](https://www.idealists.org/) to find work outside Australia.

Connections

Without a doubt, all of the work that I have gotten over the last decade (or maybe more) was due to connections I had made in my previous role. People see your work in the community and want you to work with them. If you are starting out without any existing connections, you can start to form these by volunteering. Volunteering gives a chance for people to 'try before they buy' and the commitment, reliability, skills, and charisma that you show while you are volunteering can help build trust that can result in work. If you are unreliable as a volunteer, it is unlikely that people will give you a chance in a paid role. So, do the networking, introduce yourself, and build those interpersonal relationships - they will help you for many years to come!

Volunteering opens doors

My life-changing experience started with volunteering. I had 3 months allocated out of 12 to spend in Barbados. After a month of doing the usual island experience - drinking rum punch, sitting under palm trees, getting sunburned, etc - I connected with an NGO I was told about several months earlier in South America. I spent most of the the next 2 months volunteering 5-6 hours a day at the NGO. After I eventually left, the Chairman emailed and asked if I would consider coming back for a 2 year contract. I did, and the 2 years ended up being 8. Such a worthwhile use of time on so many levels!



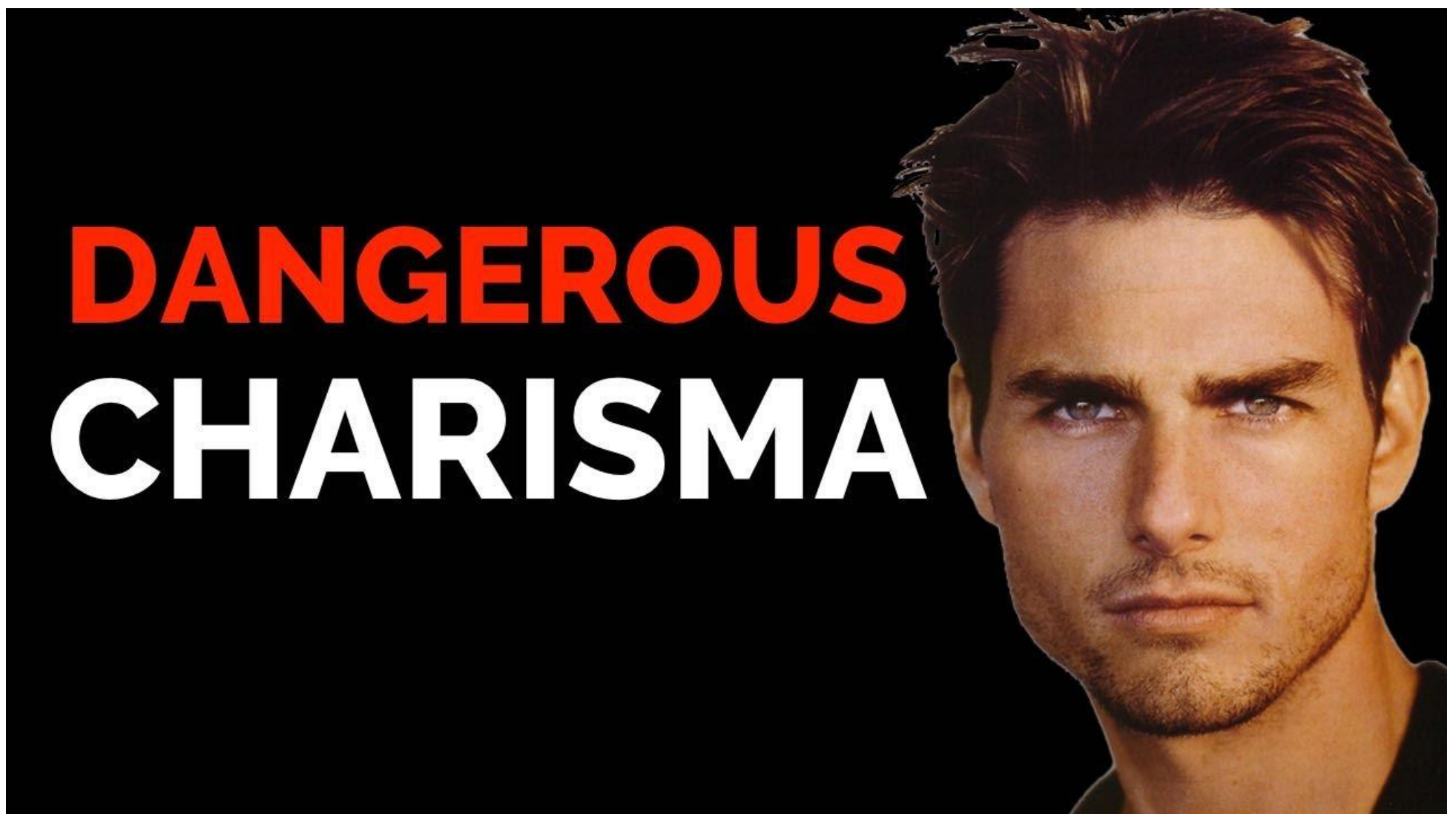
What helped
you land
the job?

Self Reflection

Working out what my values were and what they would look like in a job. I highly recommend this tool for values mapping!

Also, being open to the idea that there is no 'perfect job', and that passion is something that you cultivate (see here: <https://80000hours.org/career-guide/job-satisfaction/>)

Charisma!



Seriously though

I like to be as honest as I can be in my everyday. The people who offered me work tend to know a lot of my quirks and preferences. That means that I'm not considered for all the roles I think I want but I am placed in roles that I thrive at. I am working alongside people who I think have similar enough values and who are invested enough to support my weaknesses. What helped me land the job, I think, was being prepared to let people know my big picture whilst applying for and letting people know my skills and knowledge I currently have.

My actual community development skills/philosophies/quals allowed me to demonstrate value whilst recognising where I myself might be useful.

A job interview is a dialogue/negotiation about capacity so I think we theorise precisely the skills that land us the job. I was prepared to walk away from any job that wouldn't value my skill (or see how I could develop into the skill set required), so having the luxury/privilege of exploring my options was also important.

Reputation

From the work (paid and unpaid) that you do around the place, this builds your 'resume' - if you show commitment, passion, and dedication alongside your knowledge and skills - people will notice this, talk about the work that you do through their networks because they are impressed. So its not just who you know, but what they know about you and your work. I am constantly surprised about how many people know my name and know about my work long before I meet them. This then helps build those connections that means that people will seek you out when a job opportunity comes up.

Knowing & showing how I work

Having been a volunteer in numerous roles with a variety of organisations/ events was super valuable on my resume. I learnt a lot about the issues that I want to be involved in addressing and where my passions lie, but volunteering also enabled me to demonstrate a lot of skills that employers are looking for - e.g. working in a team, working with diverse people, managing difficult situations. I've also been told by my current manager that during the hiring process, when you have volunteering experience you're demonstrating that being involved in community life is important to you. Your volunteering doesn't need to involve 6 month stints overseas in refugee camps or other huge commitments; volunteering with your local bushcare group or helping run local events shouldn't be underestimated because it shows that your commitment to CD isn't just professional but it's personal - you're an active citizen who doesn't just talk the talk but walks the CD walk.

Be willing to get your 'hands dirty'

To this day, I am reminded that the key reason why I was invited back to contribute to this NGO was because I was seen as a 'doer'. I got in and just did whatever I saw as being needed doing - from making exhibits in the display centre, to making phone calls to schools, to working in the market garden, figuring out better systems to account for monies in and out, fund raising - whatever looked like it needed attention, I offered it.

Articulate how and why you practice CD

Another profound realisation for me was that if you can articulate how and why you practice CD in the way you do (i.e. your practice framework), you're setting yourself apart. I laboured over and sent off countless cover letters and resumes for CD roles but none of the hiring fish were biting. Then I wrote half a dozen sentences about the practice approaches which inform my practice and the principles I hold myself to. I started including this as the intro on my cover letter and BANG I was being offered interviews. So take the time to sit and think deeply about what you believe in and don't be afraid to be honest about that when applying for work.

Oh and be prepared for interviews. Research the position and the organisation as much as you can. I also find it good to have a couple of examples up my sleeve for when they inevitably say "tell us about a time when...".

What's the best advice you could give to someone starting out or starting over?

Rock the boat

Negotiate your conditions! This might mean pay rate (particularly outside Australia where things aren't so highly regulated) or something else like flexible hours to care for loved ones. Be assertive in asking for exactly what you need, the worst they can do is say no. Find an organisation that aligns with your values and actually practices them, this has turned out to be more important to me than the type of day-to-day work I do. Don't be afraid to rock the boat.

Get organised, examine the soul

[I was told] to say 'yes' to opportunities that came my way. I was inundated with job advertisements so I had to focus on which ones I wanted to apply for. (Selection criteria are onerous to fill out) So I held onto a can-do, opportunity seeking strategy. I was prepared to really ask myself what I cared about and wanted. I was also prepared to humble myself into small steps to get me where I needed to be if I was offered certain roles. I deliberated jobs that came my way and sought advice if I was worried I was selling out. The most useful thing for me was having friends look over my CV, telling me to flesh it out if I wanted more money and me personally doing an audit of my skills (particularly those learned in the MDP). After my first interview which didn't go so well because I hadn't really prepared, I stepped through my working life and interests over a few hours and got really excited about where I was at and the skills I could bring to organisations that shared similar core values to me. I laboured over my purpose and personal framework. (Implicate anyone?) I nailed the next interview and negotiated a proper pay rate.

Get out there

Without a doubt - volunteering in any capacity helps. It helps build those connections, who then turn to you when work opportunities arise. This could be sitting on a board or management committee or helping out at an event.

Also, go along to any workshops or training or conferences in the area you are interested in, get networking, and meet the people who are the drivers and leaders in that space. Do your research though - the pretty ones with the flash websites are not always the best. Talk to people, find out who is who in the zoo, and who are the good people (and organisations) to work with, and who really should be avoided (though try not to get drawn into any community politics! - and there is always politics!) Once you know the lay of the land, and notice gaps, don't be afraid of starting your own thing - though use all of your community development skills in this and collaborate with others already working in the space.


Experience

It's the classic conundrum: don't have work and can't get work experience, don't have work experience and can't get work. It can be a frustrating and disheartening situation when you're starting out or starting over, but we're lucky enough to be in an industry where (generally) our colleagues care a lot about sharing wisdom and opportunities. My advice would be to reach out to people in the industry and ask for opportunities to gain experience. I did this with [name] at my local community centre and I'm telling you, it makes a world of difference when you're looking for work. The CD and development practice community at UQ is pretty incredible, we're surrounded by so many talented and well-connected people, and they're another place to ask for help getting experience.

Volunteering is another tried and tested way to get that critical work experience, so I'd encourage people to commit time to that too. But at the heart of all that is this: look for opportunities for experience and if they're not there, create them. Whenever an opportunity arises, try to take it. No experience should be undervalued because everything we get involved with shapes our practice.

Release the fear of the unknown

It's scary stuff putting yourself in a situation where you might not know anyone or feel like you don't know anything or at least have the level of knowledge that is needed to do the job you are asked to do well. But in my experience, as Susan Jeffers says, feel the fear and do it anyway! Whether it be walking into a room where you know no-one and introducing yourself to someone who might introduce you to someone else (networking, particularly on LinkedIn is extremely valuable in getting your toe in the door!), or having a go at something you think you might not do well - facing the fear is the best way through unease. I knew no-one when I went to Barbados, but simply because I turned up and asked the question, 'So what is it that you do here [at the centre I ended up running] anyway?' I opened a door that would never have opened for me otherwise. And when it comes to volunteering, most of the time what you do for the organisation, is better than what would have been done had you not been there, and in a lot of cases, that would have been nothing. I remember one of the volunteers we had contributing to the management of our first website. He would feel despondent when I would edit his work, saying at one point, 'well I don't know why I do all this when all you do is go and change it!' I explained to him, 'without you doing the work in the first place there would be nothing to edit, so thank you and keep doing what you are doing!' Yes, you need to check if your suggestion is appropriate, but mostly, it's about having a go. Offer your services of writing a monthly newsletter, or helping out with events, or adding yourself to a mailing list and commenting on an interesting article - these are all things to get you started. It's all worth it!



Anything
else you can
think of?

Balance excitement/enthusiasm with a critical lens.

The CD world is full of dilemmas and wicked problems, and when a "solution" arises it can be easy to jump on board and sail away into the sunset. I've found that it's important to harness my excitement and enthusiasm because it motivates me to keep thinking creatively about new ways of working, but that I also need to be reflexive and critical to ensure my work is as unproblematic/productive/ethical/sustainable as it can be.

We have one life¹

This degree gives us skills and theory to really make change but there are no jobs that say 'Development Practice Graduate wanted'. Our skills and theories are useful to every cause so it's really clear to sort/seek out how we live and how we embody our craft that excites people to be working with us. Then we need to follow through which for me is a life long journey. So I tell people that my degree taught me how to observe change. I then apply this to my every day. I use my degree to help me live the life/community I want and build. Roll with the punchers. Know how to hold 'em and fold 'em. And I had to learn (from outside the academy) how to stop taking myself seriously.

For students wanting to work closer with Australian First Nations

This comes from the Blackcard library where students can subscribe to access a lot of Aunty Mary Graham's and Aunt Lilla's course work. Aunt Lilla used to teach Indigenous studies at UQ. It provides a great background to navigating the social-emotional-spiritual world in Aboriginal communities.

<http://theblackcardlearningportal.com.au/mod/book/view.php?id=11&chapterid=48>

¹ As far as we know...

Be kind to yourself and connect with your people

Crazy mental talk can come up when you walk a different path than most. You will question yourself and your decisions a lot. For me this is mostly around lack of financial security and not completing societal 'milestones' (car, mortgage, spouse, 2.5 kids etc) at the same time as peers (or ever!). That won't be relevant for everyone, but we all have our niggling doubts. Sometimes you have to sacrifice some things to do what you fulfil you, however I would never do this at the cost of personal relationships. Also, Brene Brown!

Agree with above and ensure you take care of yourself first

I agree with everything everyone said above, but as they say on the aircraft - put your mask on before you help anyone else. Without your mental and physical health, you are no help to anyone. Test your boundaries, sure, but community development is an all-in task. It is something that if it is done well, sees you connected to communities in ways you never imagined, and often, for a very long time. Don't be afraid of this; it is something to embrace assuming your values are aligned. Be prepared to learn more about yourself than you did about others. Above all, ensure you take care of yourself first. And yes, I too love Brene Brown, and also Amy Cuddy -

https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are