

Test drive your new career

By [Jay MacDonald](#) • Bankrate.com

You wouldn't buy a new car without a test drive, right? So why would you bail on your boring day job and dive headlong into your dream job without trying it out first?

Sure, getting a real feel for a potential new job while hanging onto your existing one is tricky. It also can be costly. And it definitely requires some sacrifice and commitment (remember, we're still talking work here). But when you're considering such a major change, the effort could pay off in the long run.

Options range from hiring a personal career coach to taking a sabbatical from your current job to try out a new one. You can even take a literal working vacation to explore career options.

Joel Garfinkle, a self-proclaimed [dream job coach](#), says 98 percent of us wouldn't know our dream job if it pounced on us. "Most people spend their career doing what they're good at, what they excel at, and suddenly in their early 40s they wake up and go, 'OK, I've done what I'm good at, now let me go try what would be fulfilling.'"

That awakening may be coming earlier these days, Garfinkle says.

"The average 32-year-old has held nine full- or part-time jobs, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Today, there is a lot of job changing and experimentation going on."

Garfinkle maintains we each know inside what we want to do; it's societal pressures, expectations and fear that keep us from pursuing it. Trying out a job in a safe setting can help break through that debris.

"You get to experience it," he says. "The thing that's missing for some of my clients is, they haven't tasted it yet. The more you can taste it, feel it, experience it, the more you're going to want to make it happen."

"Once you experience your dream job, it allows you to be your true self all the time, it fits into your life comfortably, naturally. It incorporates your values and it gives you energy instead of draining you."

True working vacations

Brian Kurth has tapped into today's pervasive career zeitgeist with [Vocation Vacations](#). With a little planning, his company helps searching workers spend a vacation trying out a dream job without tipping off existing bosses.

Does giving up your hard-earned leisure time sound crazy? Maybe, but consider how many people already stay tied to their jobs 24-7 courtesy of ubiquitous e-mail and text messaging via laptops and PDAs. The next short step is transferring your existing working vacation energy into a job holiday that could lead to a more fulfilling career.

Kurth, founder and chief executive dreamer of Vocation Vacations, was stuck in commuter traffic on Chicago's Kennedy Expressway several years ago when the light bulb went on: If he was whiling away his daily monoxide moments dreaming of a better life, surely his fellow commuters must be doing the same.

"I used to daydream about working in the wine industry, working with dogs

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As for the travel guide fantasy, he started helping other dreamers climb out of their [cube farms](#) as he had done. Not the shy type, Kurth set one friend up as a fashion model with Saks Fifth Avenue in New York City and made a buddy's dream come true at a Northwest microbrewery. Soon his hobby was a business.

Kurth and his vocation guides have hand-selected more than 80 mentors in 40 vocations across the United States and Great Britain, offering tailor-made, two-to-three-day immersions into your wildest dreams, as general or specific as you desire. A Vocation Vacation sampler:

- **Wedding coordinator:** Spend three days with Mary Dann, host of the Style Network's "Whose Wedding Is It Anyway?" in Los Angeles. Price: \$2,499.
- **Golf pro:** Spend two days with John Hall, golf pro at Old Ranch Country Club in Seal Beach, California. Price: \$899.
- **Zookeeper:** Work two days as a zookeeper at the Oregon Zoo in Portland, Ore. Price: \$1,999.
- **Auto racing pit crew:** Become a member of Jep Thornton's Automatic Racing team for a Grand Am Cup Series racing weekend (locations vary). Price: \$1,999 (two days) or \$2,749 (three days).
- **Country star:** Learn the music business, record a demo and attend songwriter's night at the Bluebird Café during two days with veteran Nashville songwriter and music publisher Bruce Burch (Faith Hill, Aaron Tippin, etc.). Price: \$1,899.

Half of Kurth's "vocationers" are corporate executives looking to unleash their inner child. The rest are divided between baby boomers and burned-out 30-somethings.

"Probably 50 percent of our business is curiosity seekers who are doing it for fun," he says. "The boomers are financially set, they're retired but they're not mentally retired. They're not Club Med people; these are very active people and going down to the retirement center is just not going to do it for them.

"And the 30-somethings are generally burned out and wanting to make that change before they reach their 50s. They're not willing to pay the price to become a multimillionaire and retire by 52. They're saying, 'Look, I'm not going to make it to 52. I've got a couple hundred thousand dollars saved and I just need to restart, rethink and really follow my passion.'"

Dale (not his real name), a 36-year-old Dallas IT professional, is thinking about a career in wine after taking a two-day Vocation Vacation as a "cellar rat" at an Oregon vineyard.

"I got to do a lot of different things, such as lab work and working with fermentation in the barrels and crushing grapes in from harvest," he says. "They were ready for me; they knew I wasn't there just to goof off. The vacation part was in small letters. It was very much two days of work. As serious as you want to get with it, they'll dial it up or down."

This summer, Dale hopes to continue his due diligence with a trip to the

French wine country.

What would happen if his employer found out?

"Oh, it'd be all over if they knew," he admits. "Then again, they probably wouldn't believe it."

An end to corporate cling?

Vocation Vacations is at the vanguard of the test-drive-your-dream movement, although some companies and industry groups offer their own versions. For instance, the Lion and the Rose bed and breakfast in Portland offers a one-week innkeeper training course for \$1,000 to \$1,500, room and breakfast included.

Some career-hoppers find that a work sabbatical gives them the time and access to pursue their passion without the boss finding out. Internships are another good way to shift gears if you're willing to start at the bottom.

Although job coaches such as Garfinkle and career resources such as the [Career Change Network](#) offer more guidance and advice than actual hands-on experience, they can help you connect to like-minded people who may serve as mentors or even train you privately.

Kurth knows he's in the coveted first-to-market position with Vocation Vacations, but he doesn't kid himself; competition will surely follow. To stay ahead of the curve he's launched Vocation Innovations, a corporate team-building program that pulls corporate execs out of their silos and immerses them in activities such as blending fine wine. He says response has been positive at the more progressive companies that are embracing the new realities of career paths in the 21st century.

"There are a lot of employers saying, I need to do two things: Make my employees a team and let them know it's OK to look elsewhere," Kurth says. "The days of working for the same company for 30 years are generally gone. If I can get 10 really productive years out of you, fantastic.

"And if you, on the other side, are starting to pursue your real passion, your dream, and you've done well for us and we part ways on a very cordial basis, mazel tov."

Jay MacDonald is a contributing editor based in Mississippi.

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or working as a tour guide," he recalls.

When the tech bubble burst, Kurth followed his bliss to Portland, Ore., where he soon met up with a family-owned vintner that needed his product marketing expertise. He also treated himself to a two-day session with a dog trainer.

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