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How can I build a portfolio career?

It can be difficult to know how to incorporate different areas of interest into your working life. **Abi Rimmer** speaks to experts about where to start

Abi Rimmer

“Think about what you enjoy”

Sarah Goulding, career coach and mentor for doctors and NHS GP, says, “There’s an assumption that once we’ve plumped for our specialities that’s all we want to, or should, do. In reality there are many benefits to a portfolio career and it was part of the reason I chose general practice.

“The first step is to be nosy—what are other people doing? What jobs make you a bit jealous? I’ve often been gobsmacked by the variety of careers I’ve seen when reading the obituaries section of *The BMJ*. Why not set up a search on various job sites with a very broad range—the vast majority won’t apply to you but it ensures nothing intriguing slips by.

“The second step is to research a particular area or two that pique your interest. There are often specialist groups online with colleagues whose brains you can pick. Don’t underestimate the benefits of networking—a coffee or a brief phone call may provide you not only with information but often useful contacts. If a job or an opportunity isn’t available now, it may well be in the future and people are often happy to help and delighted you share the same interests.

“Thirdly, if you don’t have a specific interest in mind, think back to what you enjoyed at school or as a medical student. There are no rules saying you must have a portfolio composed entirely of medical jobs. What elements of your life really fill you with joy and enthusiasm? We’re often drawn to more logical and fact based areas, but by allowing our creative sides to flourish we can hugely increase wellbeing.

“Lastly, try to be flexible in your thinking. Our options are rarely binary and if one line of pursuit doesn’t work out there are myriad exciting others to delve into. If you feel completely stuck, a discussion with a trusted friend, mentor, or professional coach can help you understand your motivations and move forward with confidence.”

“Don’t be afraid to break the mould”

Will Owen, GP specialty trainee and specialty doctor in paediatrics, says, “For the past two years I’ve split my week between GP training, work as a paediatric specialty doctor, helping lead a programme called Next Generation GP, and spending a day with my two year old daughter.

“Creating a portfolio career has been a brilliant way of satisfying my need for variety in my work. I’ve also found that I have more energy and I appreciate clinical time with colleagues and patients more. It also, inevitably, comes with some complexity; at times developing a portfolio career has felt like

spinning many plates—of which I’ve certainly dropped a few.

“But I have learnt a few things. Firstly, consider what different roles or opportunities will give you—not necessarily in terms of career progression but what they add to your life, wellbeing, or energy levels.

“Be clear about the challenges—aside from the added complexity of ‘life admin’ (keeping track of finances, annual leave, study leave, and so on) I’ve also experienced more self-doubt as a ‘jack of all trades, master of none.’ This is compounded by the longer time taken to gain clinical competencies and the difficulty some others have in understanding non-linear training paths.

“Find allies—when you have many different roles it can impact on the time and focus you have for each of them. Try to find supportive seniors, colleagues, or friends who know a bit about your work balance and can listen when things feel tricky.

“Build up a portfolio gradually and be flexible—sometimes things all fall into place at once but try to be realistic and not over-promise on how much time and energy you can give to each part of your week. Keep this under review; if you find the balance isn’t working for you then change it.

“Protect time for yourself and your personal relationships—this is usually the first thing to go when we get busy. Having multiple roles comes with increasing reasons to sacrifice time for ourselves or our relationships and it’s important to be aware of this.

“Finally, don’t be afraid to break the mould—training programmes can feel very rigid but flexibility is almost always possible and can bring so many benefits, sometimes you just need to find the right person to ask.”

“Find people to support you”

Harry Yong, emergency medicine education fellow, Barts Health NHS Trust, says, “Passion is the key to developing in any job, but especially in a career in a non-clinical field. If you wish to develop a career within research, governance, education, or any other complementary field it’s of vital importance that you have passion and enthusiasm for the work that you are undertaking. It is this interest that will allow you to endure setbacks, deadlines, and ultimately a lot of work that you could otherwise avoid if you were focused on a solely clinical career.

“The first thing to consider is what your interests are. Do you enjoy teaching and educational activities? Do you have a passion for research and is this laboratory

or clinically based? Do you see areas of your clinical practice that you wish to improve through audit or other governance projects?

“Knowing what areas enthuse you will enable you to have a framework around which to attach different activities. While doing this, always remember to keep in mind how your choices will be relevant to your specialty.

“Next, think about who is available to support you; talk to consultants, seniors, and medical school professors who might be able to give advice or inform you about ongoing projects.

“Lastly, remember the importance of self-direction; no one is going to offer you opportunities, and you will have to hunt them out for yourself.

“Many universities and royal colleges offer formal postgraduate qualifications in various subjects. Research and teaching opportunities are often available through both medical schools and individual hospitals, and all hospitals will have a governance lead who oversees audit projects.

“Ultimately, you must identify what you enjoy, work out what opportunities exist in this field, and then have the tenacity and willingness to go after them.”