

Turn Your Job Into a Career

Creating and Exploring Career Paths in Early Childhood Education

by Rachel Robertson

Each year, I update my professional bio and always pause at the part where it says, “Rachel Robertson has worked in the field of early childhood for over X years.” I ask myself, is it 20 years, or should I say 25 years now, or am I actually closer to 30 years? This reflection is not because I cannot remember or because it makes me feel old—although it does, a little—but because I feel so fortunate to have had such a long career doing work I love on behalf of children, families, and educators.

Not long ago, I was asked to lead a discussion on career paths in early childhood education. The discussion quickly led to a sharing of personal career paths. Each person’s story was filled with experiences unique to their interests and strengths, including a few setbacks or unexpected events that were eventually turned into opportunity, and all were very purpose-driven. But, the main takeaway was how unique each person’s path was, and how clear it was that no one path, no straight line, no “you must do this” led to a successful career in early education. This reality, unfortunately, is not always well understood by those considering or embarking on a career in this field. It certainly was not to me when I started out as an afterschool aide in high school or spent a gap year as an assistant toddler teacher.

and just as valuable, sometimes even more so. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, “*Career ladders* are the progression of jobs in an organization’s specific occupational fields ranked from highest to lowest based on level of responsibility and pay. *Career paths* encompass varied forms of career progression, including the traditional vertical career ladders, dual career ladders, horizontal career lattices, career progression outside the organization and encore careers.” And according to organizations like the Harvard Business Review, the stereotypical career ladders are much less available than they once were; instead, these organizations suggest that a person should focus on career moves rather than expecting a neatly laid out path in front of them.

So, what is a career pathway?

A career path is a journey starting at first job and continuing throughout a person’s professional life. A career path can be the stereotypical “ladder,” where a person follows a step-by-step sequence, or it can be more meandering and twisty-turny. Historically, we place more value on the ladder, but a less linear pathway is more common

Career progression is the real goal here—whether that is building expertise and excellence in your current role, diversifying your skillset and experience through a number of horizontal roles (not increasing in responsibility or salary, but different work), professional development or education to build new skills and increase job level in or outside of your current organization, or myriad other options.



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Rachel Robertson has been in the education field for over 25 years. She has degrees in education, human development, and family studies, a certificate in early education leadership from Harvard, and is a doctoral student at Northeastern. She is the vice

president of education and development for Bright Horizons, leading early education and educator professional development for the over 600 centers across the U.S. Robertson is an author of numerous articles and books including a deployment series for military families (Elva Resa); program resource books (Redleaf Press); and children’s books focused on social-emotional learning (Redleaf Lane). She also hosts a parenting podcast called “Teach. Play. Love,” and presents to parents and educators in virtual and live formats throughout the year. She is the proud mother of two adult daughters, and lives in San Diego, California.

Step One: Create a Personal Mission Statement

Most important to the success of any career path is to know what you want for yourself as a professional. Of course, salary, benefits, and other work-life considerations factor in, but I cannot overstate how essential it is to know what you want out of your career. Ask yourself, what difference do I want to make with my work? How do I want to contribute? What do I want to be known for? How do I define success? These questions help you build a personal mission statement that can serve as your touchstone as you make decisions and are presented with opportunities. They also help you achieve your own definition of success. Sure it can—and should—evolve over time, but without a mission statement, you are likely to flit and float around, rather than enjoy a professionally and personally fulfilling career.

Defining a personal mission also gives guidance to the numerous options we face as professionals every day; it helps us make micro-decisions that slowly but surely help us achieve our big goals. Should I take on that project? Should I volunteer for that assignment? Should I write that article? Should I go to that event? Should I try that new activity? Should I meet with that person? All of these micro-decisions become easier to make with a clear mission. For example, I have wanted to be an author since I was 10. I knew I would need to take classes, attend conferences, and willingly face a lot of red pens on my work, to meet this goal. Submitting articles to the local family magazine eventually turned into my first book publication and led to the next one, which led to the next one, and so on. Now, I use writing to help me meet other goals, such as supporting early educators as they build meaningful and lasting careers!

Step Two: Know Your Options

If you are here and reading this article, you are likely already working in the field of early childhood education. I hope you already realize how very important this work is and how influential the early years are on a person's whole life. I have met many people, including myself at the beginning, who considered early childhood education as one option for their education career, but did not recognize how uniquely important the first years of life are and/or did not know all of the potential career options in our field. Many people want to make a difference, but do not realize right away how suited the field of early childhood is for that life goal.

As I said earlier, it is important to start with a professional mission. Secondly, it is valuable to identify current skills and strengths that you enjoy using and would like to continue enhancing, as well as new skills and strengths you will set out to achieve. To have a successful career, you also have to possess a willingness to learn. To have a willingness to learn, you have to be willing to take a few risks and make a few mistakes, and approach each situation with intellectual curiosity.

At this point, you are likely wondering, “Okay, so what are the actual options?” There are more than I can list and more than I even know, but here are just a few openings I found on Indeed.com: early care and learning teacher or educator; health and safety director; center or program director; instructional coach; lead educator; instructional designer; marketing manager; curriculum developer; technical assistance specialist; grant writer; editor; instructor, assistant professor, or full professor; project manager; sales or client director; division vice

president; intervention specialist; director of diversity, equity, and inclusion; family educator; social media coordinator; case manager; accreditation validator; quality assurance coordinator; and, policy and advocacy liaison. The list goes on and on. Which of these piqued your interest? Which title made you want to learn more? Which connects with your personal mission?

Step Three: Do Not Let Your Passion be Your Only Asset

I cannot count how often someone has told me they were qualified for a job because of their passion. Do not get me wrong, passion is essential to me; you must be passionate about your work to be truly successful. But you need more. What makes you different? What allows you to offer a unique contribution? What strengths can you hone to make that impact on the world you intend to make?

Once you have considered a couple of roles that capture your interest, including continuing in the role you are in and becoming a true master of it, read the job descriptions. What knowledge, education, and skills are required or preferred? Do you have those? If yes, how will you continue to grow those attributes and use them to build your portfolio of work? If not, what micro-steps can you take to build those strengths? This practice leads you to the most important characteristic of a successful career path: being the captain of your own ship. Sometimes this can feel harder to do than others, but each decision you make allows you to be in control of your own destiny rather than letting life happen to you. Believing you can do this is key. This practice requires something called a growth mindset—a belief that you can grow and learn, a willingness to try

and take a few risks, grit and perseverance, a learning from my mistakes attitude, and slapping the word “yet” onto every sentence that starts with, “I cannot...”

Step Four: Build Relationships and Networks

It would be unusual to hear of a successful career path that was achieved without the help, support, guidance, or mentorship of anyone else. Professional relationships and networks are not the same as personal friendships, although they can include that element. Instead, they are mutually respectful and influential connections, through which each person gains and grows from the other. These include both casual acquaintances and ongoing and long-lasting partnerships. These are not one-sided and self-driven, but a shared experience that each individual gains from. I know the idea of this can make some people quake, but this advice is coming from a true introvert. Without recognizing it, I was building these relationships from early in my career; not simply to network for networking’s sake, but because I genuinely wanted to learn about and from others. Once I understood the value to my own personal and professional growth and, hopefully, the opportunity to do the same for others, I became a conscious and enthusiastic professional relationship builder. The same is true for networks. Join groups, attend conferences, sign up for forums, post online—do what is just a tiny bit out of your comfort zone (a little self-scaffolding) to build these fortuitous relationships. They will enrich your professional self, challenge your thinking, prompt your growth, and open doors you never knew existed.

Step Five: Go For It!

As often as you can, go for it. Once your basic and family needs are taken care of, be willing to take a few risks. Beginners are brave, which happens to be the title of my third children’s book, because I believe in this idea so very much. This does not mean you have to change your job. The word “just” does not belong before your professional introduction. As in, “I am just a teacher, I am just an assistant, I am just a manager.”

The only mistake to avoid is thinking of yourself as a finished product. Identify what the next step is for you and figure out how to take it. This will look different for everyone, so there is no use comparing yourself to anyone else. There is no rush; there is no race. A couple of years ago, I wanted to start swimming laps for exercise, but I was embarrassed because I ran out of steam after just a few laps. An acquaintance, who was a triathlete, saw me swimming one day and asked, “Why are you trying to go so fast? Who are you racing? Is this not just for you?” That advice was just what I needed to become a better swimmer and just what we all need when it comes to our careers. Do not give up, do not quit your dreams, and do not follow anyone else’s path and pace except your own. And while you are taking these meaningful and bold steps, be a cheerleader for those around you who are doing the same.

My career path has certainly not been a straight line from A to B—and for that, I am thankful. I have set my own professional mission and re-evaluate every year. I have taken some breaks and some detours, and have learned from all of it. I have been at it for over 25 years at this point, and I am nowhere close to being done.

Check out these additional career stories for some inspiration:

Sharon Bergen, faculty member in a technical college ECE program

Please describe your own career path in the early childhood education field including your first role and what you thought your career would look like.

My very first job in early childhood was as the “art person” in a summer parks and rec program. I did this during college, and it was a wonderful time to confirm my choice of an early childhood major. After college my first “real” job was as a toddler teacher. I strongly recommend that age group as a perfect starting place because if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere! I had a variety of teaching roles in differing age groups before moving into a leadership track—assistant director, director, district manager, etc. Over time, I grew into roles in operation support—training, curriculum development, acquisitions, and so on. Later in my career, I worked outside of direct care organizations, including a wonderful time as the executive director of our state’s NAEYC affiliate, and now as a faculty member at a technical college.

My career was a surprise in almost every way possible. Right out of college I expected I would teach kindergarten or something similar for my whole career. But, parenting led me to child care for what I thought would be a short stop while my daughter was young. While working in child care, I fell in love with the work and stayed! To be honest, I held many jobs I never knew existed at the beginning of my career—as the profession evolved, I did, too. I have had the privilege

of working on both big and small projects with very talented people. I made many lifelong friends, traveled to interesting places, and stretched my skills in unbelievable ways, all while working in this great profession. It has been a wonderful ride.

What skills or competencies do you think are most useful for building a successful career?

For me, commitment to excellence is the defining difference in a successful career. Anyone can put in time, but a successful career is built on making a defining difference—not compromising, persisting when things get tough, and stretching your talents a bit farther than you think you can. It is also safe to say that communication skills go a really long way in building a career. Being able to express yourself in conversation, in presentations, in writing—this all matters. Communication skills help you to teach, collaborate with peers, partner with families, and make your talents known in the profession.

What advice would you give someone considering a career in early childhood education?

This is a wonderful profession full of talented people doing important work. It feels great to be among these people doing something that makes a difference in our communities. I cannot imagine another job that so clearly impacts the world and the future like early childhood educators do. If you are ready to be part of making a difference, we need you and your talents!

Now my moment of tough love. To really be effective or make a difference in this profession, you have to be willing to not settle for what is easy, popular, or common. Sadly, there are a lot of mediocre programs out there. Too many talented professionals get

lost in programs that do not support them well or that ask them to compromise for the easy route. When you are choosing a role, choose wisely and be prepared to make a change if the program is not supporting you in reaching for excellence. Resist the temptation to be complicit in doing only what is adequate, when you can do what is extraordinary.

What is something people should know about working in early childhood education?

We often hear about the low pay, low level of respect, etc. plaguing this profession. Yes, those things are true, but early care and education can also take you places you cannot imagine. If you work hard, take risks with your career, and are open to new challenges and ideas, there are amazing opportunities in our profession. Be willing to say yes when you might be tempted to say no, and you may be surprised by the difference you can make and the opportunities that come your way. I think this advice also applies in the classroom. When you are teaching, take some chances, try new things, and flex your creativity! You will enjoy your work more and you will be the teacher that children really remember for bringing a love of learning to the classroom.

Julie Beam, division vice president,
Bright Horizons

Please describe your own career path in the early childhood education field including your first role and what you thought your career would look like.

My earliest memory regarding my career path was in high school, when I was intrigued by all the influences that were needed to support children

to grow and develop and ultimately lead them to be successful adults who contribute to our greater world. I wanted to work to develop programs to support adolescents with their journey. Following high school, I was accepted into the social work program at Syracuse University. I quickly discovered that I gravitated toward understanding the social emotional needs of others, particularly children. That led me to change my major to child and family studies and psychology. As part of the curriculum, one class involved working directly with children in a nursery lab school. It was then that I found my passion for ECE.

My first role was as an associate preschool teacher. At that time, I am not sure I had in mind what my career would be. My career path began to develop more when I was a toddler teacher at Bright Horizons and I had the opportunity to work at a new client center. I always enjoyed working directly with the children, but in this role I was exposed to more. We had intake meetings with new families, and I learned how important family partnerships were and how fulfilling that can be in our work. I felt I had an innate ability to work with children, but was exposed to professional development opportunities that helped me understand more about how my interactions and the environments that I created were essential to the child's growth and learning.

What skills or competencies do you think are most useful for building a successful career?

Openness, understanding perspectives of others, and a growth mindset.

What advice would you give someone considering a career in early childhood education?

Approach it as more than a job. Remember the impact you are having on the children and their families.

What is something people should know about working in early childhood education?

The rewards of the work are plentiful, and outweigh the hard work. The connections you make last a lifetime.

Michelle Kang, CEO of NAEYC

Please describe your own career path in the early childhood education field including your first role and what you thought your career would look like.

I went to college thinking I would become a pediatrician, but decided against it after not enjoying some of my early science classes. While I was doing graduate work in education and in business, I became interested in high quality early education and its impact on communities, and especially on businesses. That is where I decided I wanted to work, at the intersection of early education and businesses, and I found my way into the field, working with employers to invest in high quality early childhood education for its employees. I have been inspired by the educators that I have met, and continue to be awed by the work they do with children each day.

What skills or competencies do you think are most useful for building a successful career?

Three words jump to mind: curiosity, caring, and courage. As you grow in your career, there is always going to be something that you do not know how to do or do not know much about. Being curious about people and about organizations enables you to grow and

possibly take on new things that you had not contemplated. Caring, especially in the uncertainty of our world, is critical, because the core of what we do is building connections with each other. And courage is required to try new things and not be afraid to make mistakes or fail.

Greg Millien, instructional coach at Bright Horizons' Jim Greenman Innovation Center

Please describe your own career path in the early childhood education field including your first role and what you thought your career would look like.

I fell into the field, to be honest. I was in college, jobless, and my mother actually got me my interview with Bright Horizons. I came in as a teacher's aide and, as many people think, I assumed I would just play with the kids and make sure they do not hurt themselves. However, there was way more to the job than just that, and I fell in love with the field! Working with children, helping them gain an understanding of the world around them, and using emergent ideas to educate them is what pulled me in!

What skills or competencies do you think are most useful for building a successful career?

Understanding that these children have not been on this earth that long and they need the patience from their educators to get ample chances to practice skills, to make mistakes and to learn. They say it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in any field, and that equates to a little over a year. We need to give children the same amount of time to work on the different skills they are learning at such an early age.

We also need to learn to adapt our own educational approaches to fit the

children we are educating. No two children are the same. With that, you will need to change how you educate with different children; that means being adaptable and flexible in your approach to teaching, and supporting the development of the children in your class.

What advice would you give someone considering a career in early childhood education?

Continuously educate yourself in the different ages and stages of children and how they develop. Having a clear understanding of how development works and changes gives you a better toolset to educate children in a meaningful way. I am continually trying to educate myself on new and innovative ways to support children's development in ways that I may not have thought of.

What is something people should know about working in early childhood education?

That this career is about educating. Many times, in this field, you will get the "babysitter" or "daycare" label. However, we are educators! Even as early as infants, we are educating

Tell Us More

Early education teachers, early education (or related field) students, and high school or college faculty, we want to hear from you!

At Bright Horizons, we are doing some research on what people want in an early childhood education career and we would love your insights. Click on this short survey to contribute to this influential work and have a chance to win a raffle. surveymonkey.com/r/ECEcareers

these children on how to navigate and handle their emotions, we introduce them to their first experiences with literacy; we introduce them to early stages of STEM. Early childhood educators are on the ground floor of every child's development, and these are the most important years for building a strong foundation for all other learning to grow on.

References

Society for Human Resource Management. shrm.org

P. Claman. (2012). *There Is No Career Ladder*. hbr.org

