Introduction

Whether after college graduation, graduate school, or even high school, we have all been in that place of searching for our very first "official" job. For many of us, this phase of life was characterized by an endless stream of applications apprehensively forwarded into the job search abyss – with nothing but "Thanks for applying!" and a months-late "We're sorry, we've moved on with other applicants" in return. Yet, after struggles with fluttery stomachs, self-doubt, bruised egos, and well-practiced interview handshakes, some of us finally landed that first job. Or, perhaps more appropriately, we landed a job experiment.

But, perhaps, that first job was far from what we thought we would be doing, even more distant from what we had been studying, and, at times, a few steps backward – for example, an accounting major selling pharmaceutical products, an engineer with a master's degree making company coffee runs, an art history major researching cancer prevention, a food-runner turned loan officer.

Too often, job seekers are told – frequently implicitly – that they need to have it all figured out: Finish school, choose your career path, get a job right away in the right field, and work your way up the professional ladder. There is a set path you should take. The path is linear, straightforward, and predictable. But if we examine the larger career development pathway, we will notice that this narrative is inconsistent with the realities. The "traditional" narrative of stability, predictability, and certainty is flawed or, at the very least, informed by antiquated notions of what career trajectories "should" look like. Such narratives can leave today's career seekers disillusioned and discouraged.

A new narrative is needed, one informed by the actual experiences of people from different walks of life – people returning to the world of work after caring for family, folks who are entering the workforce fresh from decades of schooling with multiple graduate degrees, or folks finding that first job after working through challenges to complete high school. In this

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book, we share these experiences through story, and we aim to demystify the early career journey by presenting a tapestry of experiences from individuals across various fields and backgrounds. Thus, this book focuses on the stories of 62 people with a range of experiences and career paths, each recounting the road to first jobs and careers. This text highlights each of these participant's answers to questions such as *How did you get that first job? What was the job, relative to your initial career interests? Where are you now? How did you navigate family and reconcile aspirations with the actual?* and *How did you experience identity and/or culture as part of career path?*

The stories captured in the process of participants' authentic reflections on these questions paint a more accurate picture of what it is like to start a career, with all of the stress and disappointment, joys and fulfilling moments, and twists and turns that come with engaging in the world of work. Each story offers a glimpse into the multiple and complex ways people have overcome obstacles, seized opportunities, and carved out professional paths. These narratives serve as a reminder that there is no singular route to or definition of success; rather, success is composed of a series of personal milestones and learning moments that shape our professional lives.

Why Stories?

Why stories? In a world overflowing with advice on career-building, it is the personal story that truly resonates and inspires. In fact, it was Studs Terkel's (1974) *Working*, an anthology of people talking about what they do for work, that inspired this book. The stories in this text seek to capture the essence of diverse early career paths, highlighting the unique journeys individuals take to find their first jobs. Stories have a way of connecting us on a human level, transcending generic advice, and offering real, relatable experiences. They provide a window into the struggles, triumphs, and unexpected turns that characterize the job-seeking journey, especially for those just starting out in their careers.

Readers of this book will engage with a variety of voices – recent graduates, career changers, stay-at-home parents, and those who left higher education early in pursuit of other goals – across a range of industries (e.g., banking, farming, law, hospitality, medicine). As you take in these stories, we hope you find not just guidance but also encouragement and a sense of solidarity with those embarking on their own career paths. Through the

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power of storytelling, we hope to amplify our capacity for empathy, learn from others, and find the motivation to persevere and succeed in our own endeavors. The stories give us an opportunity to ask, "How did they do it?" and honor a long-standing tradition of oral histories and narrative anthologies.

Overview of the Book and How Readers Might Approach the Volume

While honoring the power of story, we do so in a scholarly context. We ground participants' stories in a review of historical and contemporary literature on career decision-making and development. This review, presented in Part I, provides a summary of the academic research geared toward broad audiences, offering best practices for individuals (and their supporters, e.g., career development professionals) in the search for their first job. Just as our experience informs our need for a new narrative about the first job search, this review synthesizes contemporary research on career development models, approaches, and practices to offer tangible takeaways for those engaging the twenty-first-century world of work.

Part II of this text presents the 62 stories so generously shared with us – each titled and organized by the main themes that emerged from each narrative. The index may help if you, as a reader, hope to look for stories specific to your industry or field of study and/or educational background. However, we encourage you to sit with and hold space for all of the stories. You never know, despite being a biology major, your motivation for and about work might be reinforced by the story of a budding musician!

Based on Part II's narratives, Part III offers a reflection on how these stories converge, diverge, and connect with the theories reviewed in Part I. Here we include helpful resources such as self-audit and reflection questions for career seekers as well as career development professionals. And offer helpful text- and web-based resources. We hope to offer readers ideas on how to address weighty and critical questions such as *What do I do if I'm unable to finish college? Should I go to grad school or get a job first? How do I bring my whole self and my multiple identities to my career planning process? Who can I look to for support and mentorship?* and *How can I define success for myself?*

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As authors, we believe that this book is for anyone searching for a job – especially their first job ever or new work in the context of career change – as well as folks who might be supporting those searchers. Whether you are newly out of high school, college, or graduate school, or returning to the workforce after decades working inside the home to care for family, we hope you find inspiration in these stories and tangible guidance to support your journey.

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