



Work & Career



Exercise



20 min



Client



No

Your Best Possible “Work” Self

A “possible self” is an idea or image of a potential future version of oneself [1]. Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they expect to become in the future, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming [1]. Possible selves can be thought of as “supercharged” goals, something one wants to *do* (like getting a job) and wants to *be* (e.g., a passionate employee who takes negative feedback as opportunities for growth and learning).

Research has shown that making one’s most successful future or possible selves salient improves well-being [3]. By reminding individuals of the malleability of the self (e.g., “I may not be doing well at university this year, but I will next year”), possible positive selves can promote optimism about the future and the belief that change is possible [1, 2, 4]. In addition to making people feel good, possible selves can also promote self-regulation. They can produce current behavior in pursuit of becoming like one’s positive future selves and avoiding becoming like one’s negative future selves [2].

In the context of careers work, the evidence for using possible selves is growing. Studies have shown that interventions that encourage people to consider their possible selves lead to increased motivation, clearer goals, and a clearer understanding of the steps they need to take towards those goals [4, 5]. Other studies have linked possible selves work with career goals and proactive job search in university students [7] and improved academic grades in senior school students [8, 9]. Further, salient possible selves have been shown to lead to better career planning and more proactive skill development and proactive networking [10].

This tool invites clients to visualize themselves in an ideal work role in the future and to think broadly about all aspects of a future that might be associated with their particular choice.



Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole and Dr. Hugo Alberts.



Goal

This tool aims to help clients imagine themselves in an ideal work role in the future and think broadly about all aspects of a future associated with their particular choice. Exploring their best possible future “work” self aims to promote optimism about the future, the belief that change is possible, and self-regulation.



Advice

- This exercise is a way for clients to stimulate their imagination and encourage them to be as creative as they like. This is not about being pragmatic and realistic but rather about exploring what is possible. Inform clients that they are not expected to form a plan or commit to anything they say – it is just a way to help them explore and evoke what is important to them.
- In Step 2, clients are asked to write about their possible selves. If clients struggle to express themselves using words, invite them to draw a picture of their possible self instead. Advise these clients that they can use different colored markers/paints to express different aspects and emotions of their possible selves. They might also like to cut and paste images from magazines or photos to enhance their visual expression.
- This tool would benefit clients who are career planning but focus on extrinsic factors, such as pay and location, rather than intrinsic factors, such as values and motivation.
- Some clients may need a little extra encouragement to give this exercise a go, given it relies on individuals being open to this kind of guided visualization. Practitioners should validate that skepticism is normal and that many skeptical clients have found this exercise valuable. It might also be beneficial to remind these clients that the exercise is not about making and committing to concrete plans but providing a new angle from which to think about things.
- This exercise would be particularly beneficial to use with clients who are feeling stuck, as it can reveal ideas and opinions they may have.
- This technique can be used both in individual work and in groups. In a group setting, Step 1 should be completed individually, and steps 2 and 3 should be done in pairs before coming back together to reflect on the exercise (Step 4) as a whole group.



References

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Your Best Possible “Work” Self

Introduction

Possible selves are ideas of what we will become in the future. They can represent what we would like to become, what we are afraid of becoming, or what we expect to become.

Importantly, possible selves are not just something we want to *do* (like getting a job) but also who we want to *be* (e.g., a passionate and motivated artist who explores a range of media and textiles and regularly collaborates with other artists).

Possible selves can be used in many different contexts, and in this exercise, we will use them to explore your best possible “work” self.

Step 1: Identify your best possible “work” self

Set a timer or stopwatch for 10 minutes. During this time, think about your best possible “work” self and write it down on paper. Your best possible “work” self is you in a job that you love at a workplace that inspires and supports you. You feel energized and engaged while you are at work. You are good at what you do, and your work feels meaningful and fulfilling.

While writing, do not worry about grammar or punctuation. Just focus on writing all your thoughts and emotions expressively.



Step 2: Evoke this possible self

Now that you have your best possible work self in mind, let's bring it to life. Let's get to know it. Answer the following questions:

What are you doing?

Where are you working?

What's the atmosphere like?



Who are you working with?

What are your relationships like?

What do you find fulfilling about your work?

What is the thing that is most different from your current job?



Step 3: Next steps

What can you *do* to start to move towards this possible self? What are some realistic actions you could take?

Step 4: Reflection

- What was it like to complete this exercise?
- Which aspects of your best possible work self seem to be most important to you?
- If you could time travel to the future and ask your best possible work self one question, what would this question be?