

How to Walk a Mile in Your Dream Career

By Matt Villano, www.nytimes.com

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Donna Morris and Bill Sweat were in finance. Now they make wine. Credit Julie Keefe for The New York Times

Photo by: Julie Keefe for The New York Times

AFTER 28 years at an electronics plant in her hometown, Mount Pleasant, Iowa, Toni Cory found herself out of a job when the plant closed. Instead of looking for another manufacturing job, she vowed to start a dog day-care and kennel business.

Although she had dogs of her own, she had no clue where to start. To help, she called on VocationVacations, a company based in Portland, Ore., that enables the curious to spend time trying out potential new jobs. The company hooked up Ms. Cory with Dawn Walton, an owner of the Dog Zone, a dog day care business in nearby Cedar Rapids.

There, Ms. Cory had an experience she says she will never forget.

Over two and a half days, she walked dogs; she washed them; she groomed them and fed them. When she wasn't dealing with dogs directly, she cleaned kennels, calmed cranky customers and balanced budget sheets.

Ms. Cory returned home, she said, exhausted but fulfilled. Three months later, she opened Almost Home, a dog day care and boarding service in Mount Pleasant.

"It was hard work, but that experience changed my life," Ms. Cory said. "I had a good idea I was going to do doggie day care, but getting out there and doing it was the period at the end of the sentence that convinced me to make it real."

This is the idea behind VocationVacations — putting dream careers into practice. The company sells one- to three-day immersions in 110 vocations, ranging from alpaca farming to sports announcing. The experiences are part getaway, part professional development.

The company's president, Brian Kurth, was himself a frustrated marketing executive when he founded the enterprise in 2004. Since then, nearly 1,000 customers have paid \$399 to \$1,999 for a potentially life-changing experience.

"The whole idea was to create a place where people could try an entirely new career without having to quit their day jobs," said Mr. Kurth, who is 40. "That kind of risk-free freedom and flexibility can be priceless if you're seriously considering making a change."

Mr. Kurth's service is a commercial twist on an old idea — mentoring. The small-business world is full of such programs, often free and offered by nonprofit groups, in which business owners provide knowledge and advice to would-be entrepreneurs. The Small Business Administration, for example, sponsors the Service Corps of Retired Executives, or Score, a free program to help young businesses.

VocationVacations differs in its immersive approach. The experience begins when a customer calls or logs on to the company's Web site, vocationvacations.com, and selects a job. The company then connects customers (whom Mr. Kurth calls "vocationers") with participating "mentors" — small-business owners who get a percentage of the fee.

Next, the staff members (Mr. Kurth has eight part-time employees) arrange for independent career coaches to chat with customers about their expectations and long-term goals. These meetings are optional, but Mr. Kurth said that most customers have obliged. The coaches are available to meet after the experience, too.

The highlight of every vocation vacation, of course, is the experience. In some cases, customers follow along with their mentors as observers. In others, mentors toss customers right into a daily routine, commanding them to prepare hors d'oeuvres, crunch spreadsheets or clean bird cages.

Jessica Caulfield, 28, a former real estate agent, took a vocation vacation with the Global Purchasing Companies, a retail fashion buyer in New York, and spent two days following clothes buyers on their chores. A few months later, she opened a women's clothing boutique named Jesse James in Hoboken, N.J.

In Grand Forks, N.D., Paul Holje and George Kelley opened Dakota Harvest Bakery after two days of intensive study at Pearl Bakery in Portland, Ore. The men kneaded dough, helped customers and balanced books. Mr. Kelley, 44, a former air-traffic controller, said the experience enabled him and Mr. Holje to experiment with their new careers before jumping in.

"Pearl headed us off from making a bunch of pretty significant mistakes," Mr. Kelley said, referring, for example, to preparing for the lunch rush. "It was more than just an immersion; it was a lesson in how to succeed."

The VocationVacations model does not work for everyone, however. Chris Ronan, a systems architect with eMarket Solutions, an Internet company in Dallas, said his experience with Linda Lindsay, the owner of Stone Wolf Vineyards in McMinnville, Ore., was eye opening in a different way.

Mr. Ronan signed up in October 2004, convinced that winemaking was his next career. After spending two days working at the winery, however, Mr. Ronan, 38, said he decided the business wasn't for him.

"It was a lot more intensive than I thought it would be," said Mr. Ronan, who recounted pulling grapes off a truck, crushing them and working in the barrel room among his activities. "I learned that if I were to go into wine, I would not want to have to make a living at it," but would do it for fun.

This kind of disillusionment is not always bad, particularly if it saves someone from going down the wrong career path. Mr. Kurth said that while he aimed to make every vocationer happy, he recognized that sometimes the best thing for a person is to affirm a negative.

"Just because you don't like something doesn't mean the experience hasn't been good for you," he said. "Better that you try something and learn that you don't like it than make a life change and realize a few weeks in that you've made a total mistake."

The VocationVacations immersion was entirely positive for Bill Sweat and Donna Morris. After 20 years as financial advisers for Fidelity Investments in Boston, the couple retired in 2005 to try something new.

Their something was also wine. Mr. Sweat and Ms. Morris were paired with Ms. Lindsay at Stone Wolf Vineyards as well, where they spent two days blending, bottling and making wine. They learned about bookkeeping and other aspects of running a wine business, too.

“They were very eager to learn everything,” Ms. Lindsay said. “They walked away with enough information to make informed decisions regarding their own future in the business.”

The two days proved invaluable for Mr. Sweat, 48, and Ms. Morris, 47. Last year, the couple moved to Dundee, Ore., and bought the former Goldschmidt winery, which they renamed Winderlea. Mr. Sweat said they planned to release 600 cases of pinot noir, the winery’s specialty, next year.

Technically, this will make Mr. Sweat and Ms. Morris competitors of Ms. Lindsay’s — a risk that she and most other mentors accept. A handful require vocationers to sign agreements stipulating that they won’t open a business within a 50-mile radius.

Other risks exist, too. Marci Alboher, the author of “One Person/Multiple Careers: A New Model for Work/Life Success,” said that for many VocationVacations customers, one or two days is hardly enough time to get a complete sense of what a new vocation may entail.

“To me, all you’re doing on vocation vacations is flirting,” said Ms. Alboher, who lives in New York. “If you like what you see, it’s up to you to take it to the next level and make it into a legitimate career transition exercise.”

Mr. Kurth acknowledged that the experiences his company offered were meant only as “tastes,” and that he encouraged customers to seek more training if they were still interested in switching after the immersion.

He said that some customers — nearly 30 percent, according to interviews — sign up out of curiosity, and never intend to change careers.

Although Mr. Kurth declined to reveal exactly how much his business earned last year, he said that VocationVacations was profitable and expanding. After starting with just a few immersion programs, the company’s vocations now have 225 mentors in 35

states.

Most of these experiences, including cheese maker, clock restorer and voice-over artist, cost less than \$1,000 for two days. At the other end of the spectrum, a three-day immersion with Mary Dann, a Southern California wedding coordinator whose clients include Hollywood and sports stars, costs \$1,999.

Mr. Kurth said the company would add 30 more immersion experiences this spring, in marine biology, sports umpiring and landscape architecture, among other fields.

“As long as someone has dreamed about a second career, we’ve probably got an experience that will make that person happy,” he said. “It’s never too late to give something a try.”

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1 Item added