

# Make Your Own Luck

A Self-help Tool

## Introduction

Everyone's career involves an element of chance – points when things happen which couldn't have been predicted, or were outside of their control. These chance events may be good or bad. But some people have a habit of striking it lucky, falling on their feet or, as they say in Ireland, 'landing with their bum in the butter.' Are they different from the rest of us, or is there a secret to their success?

Drawing on ten years of research, Professor of Psychology Richard Wiseman (2003, p. 3) concludes that: “... lucky people generate their own good fortune via four basic principles. They are skilled at creating and noticing chance opportunities, make lucky decisions by listening to their intuition, create self-fulfilling prophecies via positive expectations, and adopt a resilient attitude that transforms bad luck into good.” Based on his experience of having run a “luck school”, Wiseman (2003, p. 3) argues that by adopting the behaviour of naturally lucky people, you can “create your own luck”.

This Self-help Tool will take you through the factors that increase the likelihood of good things happening “by chance”. In careers research, this is known as the Theory of “Planned happenstance” (Mitchell et al., 1999), which is widely regarded as a key part of employability. By using this approach, you will be more likely to experience good luck, and better positioned to benefit from it.



## **This tool is designed to...**

- Help you understand that it is possible to increase your chances of having good luck.
- Help you understand the key factors that can create 'good luck'.
- Help you make more flexible and effective career plans.

## **Consider using this tool if you...**

- Want to make the most of the hidden opportunities around you.
- Want to open up new possibilities and break out of a rut.
- Want to get into a career which relies on informal contacts.

# How to use this tool

## 1 Stay positive

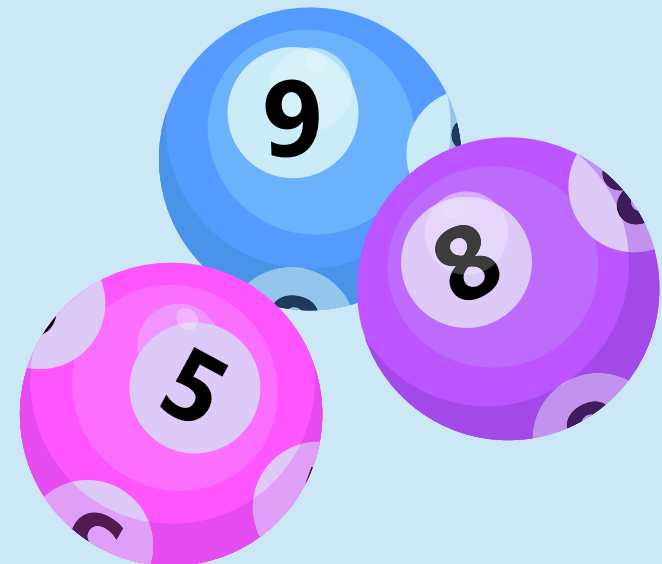
Barbara Fredrickson (2011, pp. 54-61) – a leading researcher on positivity – argues that being in a positive mood helps us broaden our outlook and build relationships. For instance, people in a positive mood have been shown to perform better in standardised tests, and were better at problem solving, generating ideas, and seeing visual patterns. Positive mood makes it easier to literally see the big picture and solve creative tasks. Furthermore, positive mood is crucial to tapping into your intuition – an important source of insight (Bolte et al., 2003, as cited in Kahneman, 2001, p. 69).

Wiseman (2004, pp. 50-51) tested this by timing how long it took people in an experiment to count the number of photos in a newspaper. On average, the unlucky people took about two minutes to count the photographs, whereas the lucky people took just seconds. Why? Because the second page of the newspaper contained the message, “Stop counting – There are 43 photographs in this newspaper.” This message took up half of the page... It was staring everyone straight in the face, but the unlucky people tended to miss it, and the lucky people tended to spot it.

On top of this, there is a strong association between positive mood and being open to other people (Fredrickson, 2011, pp. 62-70), which, as we'll see later, are an important part of the luck factor.

Developing a positive mood isn't always easy and, at tough times in our lives, can be difficult. Deciding how and when to be positive is very much a matter of individual judgement. No one is suggesting you should be positive all the time! But, where you can stay positive in a way that feels right and authentic for you, it has real benefits. Some things which can help include:

- Treating yourself with kindness and self-compassion.
- Developing a sense of purpose.
- Setting and achieving goals.
- Taking pleasure in small, ordinary things that can fill our everyday lives with pleasure.
- Accessing positive memories.



## 2 Mix it up

Albert Einstein famously defined insanity as ‘Doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting a different result.’ It makes sense that the same set of actions will produce the same set of outcomes. So, in terms of careers, doing the same projects, belonging to the same professional societies, or studying the same degree topics, will lead to the same sort of opportunities.

And that’s fine if its working for you. But if not, you need to mix it up a bit. If you have a particular career in mind, why not do some relevant volunteering in your spare time for instance, or a LinkedIn Learning course? Once you introduce change into your life, you have new things to talk about, new possibilities open up and, as you meet new people, you create new connections.

This is what Wiseman (2004, p. 58) found. He noticed that his lucky respondents took very deliberate steps to vary their experience and circle of acquaintances. One person, for example, changed their commute to work frequently. Another person, when going to a party, would randomly choose to speak only to people wearing a particular colour.

How does this help increase the chance of good luck? Wiseman (2004, p. 58-9) explains it like this:

“Imagine living in the centre of a large apple orchard. Each day you have to venture into the orchard and collect ... apples. The first few times it won't matter where you decide to visit. All parts of the orchard will have apples .... But as time goes on it will become more and more difficult to find apples in the places that you have visited before. ... But if you decide to always go to parts of the orchard that you have never visited before, or even randomly decide where to go, your chances of finding apples will be dramatically increased.”

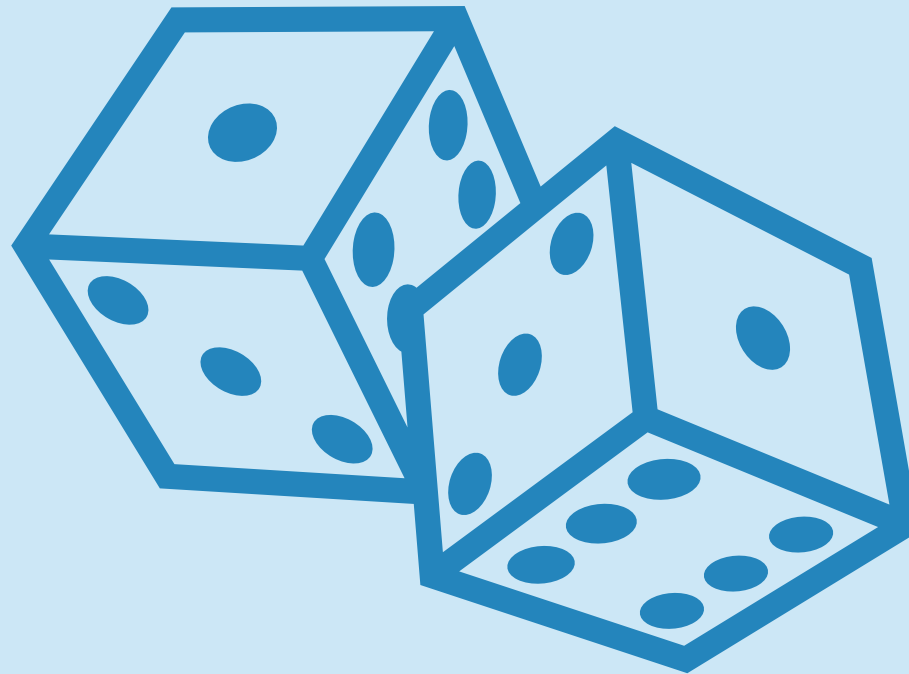
Of course, you don't need to have a specific career in mind. You can just do what looks interesting to you and see what happens next. Sometimes, starting with small changes like changing your route to university/work, cooking new meals, or listening to new genres of music, can free you up and create the momentum for larger changes later.



This is the thinking behind the [Do Something Different](#) website and free app, which helps you set personal goals and plan small steps. The app encourages practical, achievable actions that are about ‘making progress rather than perfection.’

Relevant resources include:

- [Third Sector Leaders Kirklees](#) – local volunteering opportunities.
- [Do it](#) – National volunteering opportunities.
- [Careers Opportunities Catalogue](#) – ideas for developing yourself through free learning courses and experiences.





## 3 Connect with your contacts

People can be powerful allies who can help you with insights, ideas, and the inside track on unadvertised opportunities. These relationships don't necessarily need to be deep friendships, of course. Wiseman (2004, p. 43) found that many lucky people reported how: "...they consistently experienced good luck simply by connecting with the people they met on a daily basis." Encouragingly, research also shows that most people will respond to requests for help and assistance (Ober, 2023). So, friendly acquaintances can be hugely valuable.

Each person will have their own contacts as well, so getting to know just one new person will practically double the number of people you can connect with. In fact, the 'six degrees of separation theory' argues that it takes just six different people to connect with anyone else in the world. While this might be an exaggeration, it is amazing how many people each of us knows.

The popular TV programme 'Race Across the World', in which contestants travel for thousands of miles on a limited budget using public transport, shows how important personal connections can be. Very often, it was advice from the locals that gave the winning teams the edge.

Having contacts is only half the story. Building relationships and asking for help is crucial. Do the people you're acquainted with know what careers you are interested in? Have you shared your plans with them? Sometimes, people just need that prompt to unlock what they know, and give a helping hand.

# Pause, Reflect, Act

- What do you want to do to develop a more positive approach?
- What do you want to do to develop a greater openness to new things?
- What ways could you create some good luck for yourself?
- What are the key insights you've taken from this Self-help Tool?
- What actions do you need to take now to build on this exercise?
- Who could help you with this?
- Are there other, related Self-help Tools you'd like to use as well?

**NB: Because everyone is different, no one solution is a magic bullet, so please look at our other Self-help Tools as well, and use the ones that work best for you.**

Other tools which you can use to look more in-depth at career decisions include:

- Butterfly Effect – understanding how chance events have affected your own career story.
- The Sea of Unknowing – realising that life is uncertain and we can never know everything.
- Power-ups – simple ways of boosting your positivity, that can be added to your normal day.

# References and Resources

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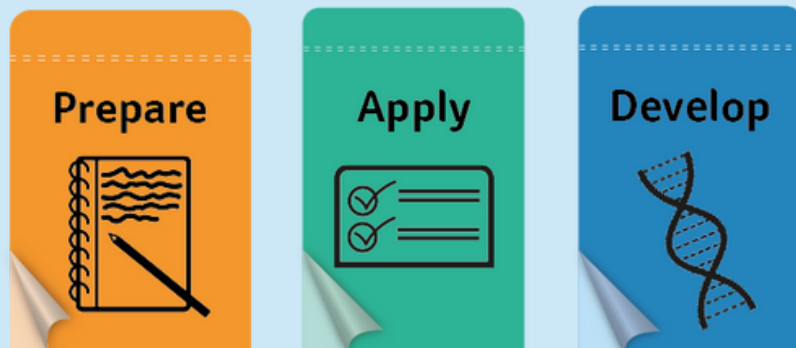
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Wiseman, R. (2003). The Luck Factor. *The Sceptical Enquirer*. Vol 27, No.3. [Text](#)

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D. Stanbury, 2023



If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our Self-help Tools with your students, we would love to hear from you and share good practice. We would ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy, and acknowledge the other sources we have used. Thank you.