

The Dream Career – Is It Something We Find, or Something We Create?

An interview with Tim Crowden, Executive Coach and Founder of Coaching and Leadership

Careers are changing. The idea that we choose a profession, work our way up through an organisation and eventually retire is no longer the only model for a successful working life.

Increasingly, people are exploring different careers, developing new interests, combining professional roles and reconsidering what success means to them.

But how do we move from simply thinking about a different future to actively creating one?

We spoke with Tim Crowden, executive coach, former senior public servant and founder of Coaching and Leadership, about finding purpose in our working lives, navigating career transitions and creating what he calls an *encore career*.

Tim, what exactly is a dream career?

I think we need to move away from the idea that there is one perfect job waiting for us somewhere.

A dream career isn't necessarily about having the most senior position, earning the highest salary or working for a prestigious organisation. It's about finding work that draws on your strengths, reflects your values, gives you energy and provides a sense of purpose.

And importantly, what constitutes a dream career at 25 may be vastly different from what it looks like at 45, 55 or 65.

Our interests evolve. Our circumstances change. We develop new capabilities and discover things about ourselves that we might never have anticipated earlier in life.

I increasingly encourage people to think about their careers as something they can actively shape and reshape, rather than a predetermined path they are expected to follow.

The question isn't simply "What do I want to be?" but "Who am I becoming, and what do I want the next chapter of my working life to look like?"

You've written about having more than one career. How does that fit into this thinking?

For much of our working lives, we're encouraged to answer a deceptively simple question: "What do you do?"

And usually, we're expected to have one answer.

I'm a lawyer. An engineer. A teacher. A public servant. An accountant.

But why should we have only one answer?

You might be a senior executive who also teaches. A lawyer who writes. An engineer who mentors emerging leaders. A public servant who develops a small business around a personal passion.

These aren't necessarily competing interests. They can complement one another, develop different capabilities, introduce us to new networks and provide enormous personal satisfaction.

And we don't always need to leave one career to pursue another.

Sometimes the most fulfilling professional life is one in which we combine different interests, skills and opportunities.

A career doesn't have to be linear to be successful.

You've spoken about your own "encore career". Where did that idea come from?

A number of years ago, around one of those significant birthdays, a good friend asked me what I planned to do when I retired.

I remember being quite surprised by the question.

At the time, I was enjoying a fulfilling career in the Australian Public Service. I'd held senior executive roles, worked internationally and had opportunities that I could never have imagined when I first entered the workforce.

Why would I be thinking about retirement?

But the question stayed with me.

It prompted me to think more deeply about what I enjoyed, what gave me energy and how I wanted to spend the next stage of my professional life.

I started talking with people I trusted – family, friends, colleagues and people who had worked with me over many years.

I expected them to identify things such as strategic planning, crisis management, organisational leadership or managing complex programs.

Instead, a recurring theme emerged.

They talked about my interest in developing people, coaching, mentoring, building leadership capability and helping others achieve things they might not have thought possible.

And when I reflected on my career, it made perfect sense.

Some of the most rewarding experiences I'd had weren't necessarily associated with the most senior positions I'd held. They were the opportunities to work with people, develop their confidence, challenge their thinking and see them grow.

That realisation helped shape what would eventually become my encore career.

Today, having transitioned from more than three decades in public service, I run Coaching and Leadership, work with executives, managers and teams, and have established The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra.

It's a quite different professional life, but one that draws heavily on the experiences, relationships and capabilities developed throughout my earlier career.

My encore career wasn't a rejection of my previous career. It was a continuation of it – in a different and deeply rewarding form.

So how does someone begin creating their own dream career?

I generally encourage people to think about three things – imagining their future, understanding themselves and taking deliberate steps towards what they want.

Step 1 – Give yourself permission to imagine a different future

One of the first things I ask people in career coaching is to imagine themselves five or ten years into the future.

Not simply in the next position they might be promoted into, but in a professional life they would genuinely enjoy.

For a moment, put aside the immediate constraints – the mortgage, the expectations of others, geography, current qualifications or the career path you've already invested in.

Ask yourself:

- What would I love to be doing?
- What sort of people would I like to work with?
- What would a really satisfying working week look like?
- What would I like to be learning?
- What contribution would I like to make?
- What would I like to have more of – or less of – in my life?

The purpose isn't to create an unrealistic fantasy. It's to give yourself permission to consider possibilities that might otherwise be dismissed too quickly.

We can become so focused on the next logical career step that we stop questioning whether it's actually the direction we want to travel.

Step 2 – Understand what really matters to you

This is where the deeper reflection begins.

In my coaching, I often find that people have a particularly good understanding of their professional capabilities but haven't spent much time considering what genuinely motivates them.

They know what they're good at. But that's not necessarily the same as knowing what they love doing.

Some useful questions include:

- What gives me energy and makes me look forward to the day?
- When am I happiest and most engaged in my work?
- What activities are so absorbing that I lose track of time?
- What did I enjoy doing before career expectations and responsibilities began shaping my decisions?
- What strengths do other people consistently recognise in me?
- What do I value most in my professional and personal life?
- What would I do differently if I weren't concerned about other people's expectations?
- What contribution would I like to make in the next stage of my life?
- What would I regret not having tried?

These questions aren't always easy to answer.

And sometimes the most valuable insights come from inviting others into the conversation.

We all have blind spots. We may underestimate capabilities that come naturally to us or overlook strengths that others can see very clearly.

This is also where working with a professional coach can be valuable.

A coach doesn't decide what your next career should be. Rather, they partner with you to explore your thinking, challenge assumptions, recognise patterns and consider possibilities you may not have previously explored.

Often, the real breakthrough isn't discovering a new career opportunity. It's developing a deeper understanding of yourself.

Step 3 – Turn the aspiration into a plan

Dreams are important, but they rarely become reality without deliberate action.

Once you have a clearer picture of what you want, the next challenge is working out how to get there.

And that doesn't necessarily mean resigning from your current position or making a dramatic career change.

It might mean undertaking further study, accepting a different responsibility, building professional networks, volunteering, finding a mentor or gradually developing a second career alongside your existing one.

Sometimes a sideways move provides more long-term value than a promotion. Occasionally, even a step backwards creates the opportunity to take two steps forward.

I encourage people to ask themselves:

- Will this opportunity move me towards the professional life I want?
- What capabilities, experiences or relationships do I need to develop?
- What assumptions about my career might be limiting my choices?
- What could I start doing now, without leaving my current role?
- What is one meaningful step I could take over the next three months?

It's also worth remembering that a career plan shouldn't become another constraint.

The world changes. Opportunities emerge. Our priorities evolve.

A good career plan provides direction without closing the door on possibilities we haven't yet imagined.

Does career development become more important as people approach retirement?

I think it becomes different, rather than necessarily more important.

For many people, their professional identity has been intricately connected to their work for decades.

When that work comes to an end, they can lose much more than a salary.

They may lose structure, professional relationships, intellectual stimulation, a sense of contribution and part of their identity.

That's why I think it's important to have something meaningful to move towards, rather than simply something to retire from.

For some, that might be another career. For others, volunteering, mentoring, study, community involvement, creative pursuits or spending more time with family.

There's no single right answer.

But I do think there's enormous value in considering these questions well before the final day at work.

And an encore career doesn't have to wait until retirement. It can begin while you're still enjoying your current profession.

What about people who are happy in their current career but want to progress?

That's an equally important part of career development.

Not everyone is looking for a dramatic change. Many people simply want to become more effective leaders, make a greater contribution or prepare for their next professional opportunity.

But there's an important distinction between understanding the requirements of a role and being ready to succeed in it.

For example, someone might understand the capabilities expected of a senior executive, know the relevant leadership frameworks and have considerable technical expertise.

Yet they may still struggle to articulate their leadership approach, recognise the impact they have on others or demonstrate their readiness for more complex responsibilities.

As careers progress, success increasingly depends not only on what we know and what we can do, but on how we think, how we make sense of complexity, how we engage with different perspectives and how we lead through uncertainty.

Sometimes the next career step requires more than developing additional skills.

It requires us to grow in how we understand ourselves, others and the challenges around us.

That's an important part of the work we do through executive and career coaching at Coaching and Leadership.

Finally, what advice would you give someone who feels their career has reached a crossroads?

First, I'd encourage them not to assume that a crossroads is necessarily a problem.

It may be an opportunity.

Some of the most interesting professional transitions begin when people start questioning assumptions they've held for many years.

They might ask whether success still means what it once did, whether they're using their strengths in the most satisfying way, or whether there's another contribution they'd like to make.

I often think about those people we've all worked with who seem to bring energy into a room.

They're engaged, interested, curious and genuinely enthusiastic about what they do.

It's not necessarily because they have the most impressive job title or the highest salary.

Often, it's because there's a strong connection between who they are, what they value and the work they're doing.

And that's probably the closest thing I can think of to a dream career.

Perhaps the goal isn't to find the one perfect career. It's to keep creating a professional life that remains meaningful as we grow, change and discover new possibilities.

About Tim Crowden

Tim Crowden is an Executive Coach, International Coaching Federation Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and founder of Coaching and Leadership.

Following a 32-year public sector career, including 16 years in the Australian Government Senior Executive Service and senior leadership appointments in Australia and internationally, Tim transitioned into executive coaching and leadership development.

With more than 1,700 hours of documented professional coaching experience, he partners with executives, senior leaders, managers and teams across government, business and other organisations.

Tim established The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra at the beginning of 2025.

Through **Coaching and Leadership**, Tim and his colleagues provide executive coaching, career transition support, leadership development and highly individualised *Winning That Job* workshops. These services help participants understand their professional capabilities, prepare for new opportunities and navigate important career decisions with clarity and confidence.

coachingandleadership.com.au