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[home](#) > [job hunting advice](#) > [changing careers](#)Breaking Into Your Dream Industry
When You Lack Superstar Skills

By Sarah E. Needleman

Jeremy Atkins enjoys many of the benefits of a successful comic-book illustrator, though he doesn't have a shred of artistic talent.

Mr. Atkins, 30 years old and a collector of comics since childhood, gets free passes to trade shows, discounts on his favorite toys, and the chance to hobnob with such industry luminaries as Frank Miller, creator of Batman: The Dark Knight Returns. The perks come with his job as director of publicity for Dark Horse Comics Inc.

If you're passionate about a certain industry but lack the skills commonly associated with its most visible leaders, you can try to pursue a career working on the sidelines. Being behind the scenes may offer more than just the opportunity to score freebies and gain exposure to your dream industry's superstars. The career choice may also help you enjoy what you do for a living as well as pay your bills.

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Eric Doyne says he originally abandoned his goal of

athlete failed. "I really gave the [bicycle] racing thing a go in college," he says. "I won some races, but I realized I wasn't a Lance Armstrong." Mr. Doyne also studied journalism in school, and after graduating in 1999, he says he landed an entry-level public relations job at a large agency. In his fourth year there, a colleague enlisted his help on an account for a bike company, and "a light bulb turned on," he says. "My job went from being just any job to one that I felt incredibly passionate about."

Now, as the owner of a small public-relations firm called Dispatch, 31-year-old Mr. Doyne handles publicity for companies that sell biking and other sports products. He says he takes client meetings on ski lifts, helps run professional sporting events and often receives free gear and apparel. "I always have the latest and greatest stuff," he says.

Think broadly in terms of the types of employers to target within your favorite industry. For example, if you want to work in high fashion, look beyond the runway or design studio to jobs at clothing warehouses, licensing agencies and consulting firms, says Dan Lagani, president of the Fairchild Fashion Group in New York. Magazine editors, he says, "literally have a front-row view of the world's greatest fashions six months before any consumer ever sees them."

It's important to demonstrate your passion for your dream industry in a professional manner -- and avoid coming across as a drooling wannabe. "Nobody is going to hire a groupie," says Flip Flippen, author of "The Flip Side: Break Free of the Behaviors That Hold You Back" (Springboard Press, 2007). "Employers aren't looking for fans; they're looking for producers."

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Start by joining trade groups and attend the conferences, seminars and other events they host, says Alexandra Levit, author of the upcoming book, "How to Score THAT Gig" (Random House, 2008). By citing your membership to these organizations on your resume, you'll also boost your credibility, she adds.

Networking is especially critical if you're pursuing a job at a high-profile company -- no matter what department it's in, adds Ms. Levit. "Everybody wants to work for them, so they don't need to try as hard to get qualified applicants," she says. "They'd rather have people who they know, people who come in through recommendations."

Developing a solid network can take several months, so don't quit your job while you're harvesting leads, warns Ms. Levit. "Start pecking away at the industry by getting to know what the situation is before making that leap," she says.

Volunteer opportunities are also a way to make connections and learn the ropes, says Cynthia Shapiro, a career coach in Los Angeles. "You'll show that you are willing to give extra of yourself for the industry," she says. "That's what makes people sit up and notice."

Upon landing a job interview, be sure to express your enthusiasm and knowledge of the industry without going overboard. A candidate for a midlevel sales job at the McFarlane Toys was declined an offer after gushing about the manufacturer's founder, Todd McFarlane, creator of the comic book Spawn. "He knew everything about Todd -- every public appearance he's made, every comic he's had a hand in," says Melanie Simmons, executive director human resources, for the Tempe, Ariz.,-based firm. "It was almost stalker-like."

Upon landing a job in your dream industry, keep it cool or the stint might be short-lived. On his first day of work at McFarlane, a retail sales associate showed up with a stack of comics for Mr. McFarlane to sign, says Ms. Simmons. "He didn't last very long," she says.

Keep in mind that working in your favorite area could potentially sour your interest in it outside the office. Stanley Tang says he couldn't stand to watch a baseball game on TV after coming home from his former marketing-production job at MLB.com, the online home of the Major League Baseball Association in New York. "I got totally burnt out," says the 34-year-old. "I was surrounded by television screens that were showing 10 to 15 games a day." A longtime Yankees fan, Mr. Tang says he's happier now working for ESPN Inc. as a technical producer because he's assigned projects that pertain to a wide range of sports. "I deal with ones I've never even heard of like competitive eating," he says.

-- Ms. Needleman is associate editor at *CareerJournal.com*.

Email your comments to sarah.needleman@wsj.com.

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