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*Manager's Quick Guide: Managing People*  
**WORKING OUT A CAREER PLAN**



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# Introduction

The importance of taking control of your career and accepting responsibility for your own career progression cannot be over-estimated. Developing a career plan is part of that responsibility. Proactively managing your career can ensure you follow a career path that will fulfil your own values, interests and ambitions and meet both your professional and personal objectives.

Managing your career is an ongoing process, rather than a single intervention. However, there are times when your career will require more input, especially if you are looking to change jobs or gain promotion. Reflecting regularly on your career aims will help you to develop a career strategy - planning your objectives and the steps involved in reaching them. A career plan provides a useful benchmark, and allows you to develop a realistic picture of your progress. It will also increase your chances of ultimate success. Time spent in reflection is never wasted and will also help you to identify the unique mix of skills, strengths and limitations you have and assess how these may change over time. Reflection leads to clarity, so that when opportunities emerge you are able to make informed choices.

Working out a career plan will ensure that you spend time understanding and organising yourself, so as to develop your talents and abilities and make the most of them. You will then feel more confident about your future, and this confidence should be reflected in your general behaviour at work, or in interviews. Being career-conscious, having plans for the future and working on your own development all contribute to your overall employability.

## Definition

Career planning is traditionally understood as the process of assessing personal strengths, values and aspirations, establishing goals and objectives; identifying the steps needed to achieve them; and putting this information into a written career plan, which will then be periodically reviewed and updated.

# Action checklist

## 1. Understand who you are

The foundations of any plans for the future are based on your understanding of who you are, what is important to you, and your dreams and hopes for the years ahead. This understanding will help you to begin the process of planning and making decisions for your future career. These simple questions can help you reflect on your career thus far:

What are the significant influences in your life, and how have these affected your career?

- What motivates you? What inspires you?
- What are your values?
- What are your skills?
- What do you see as your strengths/weaknesses?
- What have been your successes and failures?
- What are your current obligations and commitments?
- Do you have talents that you feel are underdeveloped?
- Do you feel in a rut of any kind?
- What has triggered your job moves in the past?

How we perceive ourselves is not always how others see us. So when assessing who you are, it is helpful to ask people you trust to give you a candid appraisal and offer constructive advice for improvement.

## 2. Consider the direction you want your career to take

Using your current position as the starting point, begin thinking about the direction you want your career to take. It is helpful to visualise the ultimate end goal and then work backwards to where you are now. This will enable you to clearly see the gap between the present position and the future ideal. Political campaigners use this approach when planning for a forthcoming election. They focus on the election date and then work back to the present; carefully calculating the steps that need to be taken in order to reach it. Another technique for visualising and planning ahead is to write your future CV, inserting things you want to achieve such as additional qualifications, job roles or experiences and then realistically calculating how long it will take to attain them.

## 3. Set realistic timeframes

It can be difficult to project how long it will take to reach some career goals, but it's important to set timeframes which are as realistic as possible. Being unrealistic about your prospects can lead to frustration and demotivation. Careers develop sporadically. Early goals may be met reasonably quickly as a result of your qualifications or participation in a fast-track programme; climbing up the organisational hierarchy may take a lot longer as you gain knowledge and experience and build a reputation as someone who can be trusted to get things done. If you aspire to a particular role within your organisation, don't be afraid to cultivate contacts with senior managers who already hold your dream job to discover how they gained their position and how long it took them.

With organisations constantly evolving and restructuring it is no longer practical to map out the entire course of your working life from the start. Although it is helpful to give an overall structure to your plan by thinking about medium and long-term goals, these should be marked 'subject to change' so that the plan doesn't become rigid and prevent you from taking advantage of fresh opportunities as they arise. In today's rapidly changing social and business environment, trying to anticipate what may happen ten, twenty or thirty years ahead is futile. Instead, focus primarily on shorter term milestones. This will put you in a better position to adapt to changing conditions or setbacks without throwing you entirely off course. Once you have fulfilled your short-term goals, you can then concentrate on the next stage until you finally reach your ultimate goal.

## 4. Stabilise your career

Your career plan may include periods of your working life when you wish to maintain the status quo. This could be for a number of months or years, depending on your personal situation. There are various reasons why you may choose to do this. It could be that, for the present, you are satisfied with your life as it is, or that obligations and commitments make it untenable for you to make changes things at present. It may be due to achieving a feeling of contentment after a period of unrest when you've felt unsettled or frustrated. Or you may simply have worked hard to reach a position that you now occupy and want to enjoy for a while! Whatever reasons lead you to consciously remain in situ, the decision should be a positive one. Don't allow a fear of change, anxiety about the future or worse still, indifference to your career development to make you passive or inactive.

As well as opting to stabilise your career, you may actively decide to 'press pause' at some point. Raising a family, pursuing a long-held ambition to travel, or undertaking a volunteering opportunity may all require a break from the pursuit of your career goals, but may make a substantial contribution to your personal satisfaction and well-being. Personal lives and working lives run parallel to each other and sometimes an overlap between the two will necessitate a break from career progression.

### 5. Devise a flexible plan to meet the unexpected

Although you may make a conscious decision not to change your job, sometimes change can be thrust upon us by factors outside our control. Career stability and progress may be threatened by redundancy, company mergers, demotion or ill health. Adopting a flexible approach to planning your career is crucial as it will help you to roll with the punches, as well as the positives, and come to terms with diversions without losing sight of the end goal. If your career plan is too rigid, i.e. I must achieve x by y date, failure to meet goals by a given time could result in a loss of confidence and motivation. This can set you back for weeks, months or even years with time wasted and ambitions left unrealised.

### 6. Forge ahead proactively

If you make the conscious decision to purposefully seek opportunities to advance your career, there are many ways to approach this. You can make small or large changes, depending on the scale of your ambition. You may decide to make a big change in one area, a small change in one area, or several small changes concurrently. You may plan to make changes over an extended period, or as quickly as possible.

Consider the impact any major career decisions will have on other aspects of your life. Gaining that promotion, for example, could necessitate a house move, a longer commute to the office or longer working hours. Ensure that any changes you build into your career plan are fully supported by those who will be affected by your decisions, and that you factor in any additional time and resources required to execute your plans.

### 7. Change your current position

Within your current job, there may be ways to enhance what you are doing and so increase your job satisfaction or your chances of promotion. Here is a list of suggestions:

- look for alternative ways of doing things and suggest improvements
- undertake a new project
- volunteer for new responsibilities
- negotiate a redefinition of your job role to include more stretch
- participate in a job swap or consider more formal secondment possibilities
- develop your network of colleagues across the organisation
- organise a visit to another department
- offer to coach new colleagues
- shadow a colleague
- investigate the options of part-time, job share, flexible employment.

### 8. Change yourself

It may be that you need to improve your career prospects by changing or developing yourself:

- learning new skills or updating rusty ones
- setting yourself more realistic expectations or more ambitious targets
- re-examining your attitudes and behaviour.

You may be able to take advantages of training courses and qualifications offered by your organisation with the aim of up-skilling their workforce. Bear in mind, though, that you, not your organisation, are responsible for

your career progression. Consider looking beyond your current employment for ways to develop yourself. For example, undertaking an independent course of study or volunteering in your spare time could equip you with new skills, fill any 'gaps' in your knowledge and/or experience, and place you in a stronger position for career advancement. If you are considering a change of profession or role consult a careers adviser to help reshape your plan to fit your ideals. A related checklist offers advice on this subject. (See Additional resources below.)

# Action checklist

## 9. Change your job

The concept of a 'job for life' is now mostly a distant memory. Many ambitious people now expect to change jobs every two years or so, although a period of economic recession may have encouraged people who feel that their jobs are relatively secure to stay in place longer. Weigh up the prospects you have in your current position.

Look at the structure of your organisation. Does it offer room for you to grow? Flat organisational structures, or small companies can limit the possibilities of advancement. If your only route to promotion is to wait for your boss to retire, your career may stagnate for some time. Conversely, in a large organisation, you may feel like just another face in the crowd and struggle to stand out from others. When your current position is failing to offer the opportunities you are looking for, it is time to consider changing jobs.

Networking will be important, whether you are looking for new opportunities with your current employer, a new employer or even thinking of setting up your own business. Make use of internal networks and professional or local networking groups, as well as online networks such as LinkedIn. You will need to follow up useful contacts and establish new ones in career areas and sector you are attracted to.

If you want to change your job completely, take a positive approach, and examine your position creatively to ensure as close a match as possible between what you can offer and what employers are looking for.

Consider whether, for example:

- you can identify gaps in your skills
- you have the time to update your skills or learn new ones
- you can polish up your interview techniques
- you need to update and tailor your CV to the type of job you are seeking.

There is no guarantee that the right job will become available at the right time or that your applications will be successful. If your initial job applications are unsuccessful, persevere and try not to become discouraged. Ask for feedback and adjust your applications as necessary. Wait patiently for the right opportunity to arise and adjust your plan accordingly.

Don't limit yourself to thinking about opportunities which offer promotion. A sideways move or even a demotion can broaden your experience, reacquaint you with the realities of the shop floor, increase job satisfaction and/or improve work-life balance. Remember, this is about career planning, not necessarily career progression.

## 10. Update and reshape your plan

As time passes you may find that you have overestimated some abilities and underestimated others; you have discovered capacities you did not realise you had; or that circumstances have made some of your skills redundant or obsolete and others more important. Your career plan will need regular revision to keep it on course. Earmarking a specific date on the calendar is a good way to ensure you consciously take time to review it. The start of the year; your birthday; the date you started work at the company, or the date you left school/graduated and began your career – whatever date you select, commit to reviewing your plan annually and make adjustments to fit the ever-changing world of work. Failure to review your plan regularly can result in a state of inertia, whilst colleagues forge ahead. Career planning keeps your working life moving forward proactively and prevents you from plateauing as a manager. Once you've achieved your goals continue to seek new challenges to keep your passion for work alive.

# Potential pitfalls

Managers should avoid:

- setting unrealistic goals
- restricting ambitions
- over-detailed and/or rigid planning
- attempting to project years into the future
- ignoring the feedback and opinions of colleagues
- relying on others to determine their career path

## Additional resources

### Books

You: rebranded – be seen, be heard, be noticed, Richie Manu

Bancyfelin: Independent Thinking Press, 2014

The small print of success: the little details that will make a big difference to your career, David Thompson

London: Marshall Cavendish Business, 2012

Get the job you really want, James Caan

London: Penguin Books, 2011

John Adair's 100 greatest ideas for personal success, John Adair, Chichester: Capstone, 2011

This title is also available as an ebook

Management rules: 50 new rules for managers, Jo Owen

Chichester: Capstone, 2011 (See especially the section on career management.)

This title is available as an ebook

What color is your parachute: a practical manual for job hunters and career changers, Richard Nelson Bolles, Rev ed

Berkeley Calif: Ten Speed Press, 2010

If not now when: how to take charge of your career, Camilla Arnold and Jane Barrett,

London: A and C Black, 2010

What's your type of career: find your perfect career by using your personality type, 2nd ed., Donna Dunning,

Boston Mass: Nicholas Brealey, 2010

What got you here won't get you there: how successful people become even more successful, Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter, London: Profile Books, 2008

This title is available as an ebook. A hard copy of the 2011 edition is also available.

### Journal articles

Rebounding from career setbacks, Mitchell Lee Marks, Philip Mirvis, Ron Ashkenas

Harvard Business Review, October 2014, vol 92 no 10, pp 105-108

Making all the right moves, John Lees Training Journal, June 2013, pp 24-27

A campaign strategy for your career, Dorie Clark

Harvard Business Review, November 2012, vol 90 no 11 pp131-4

### Related checklists

033 How to succeed at job interviews

055 Writing your CV

092 Personal development

125 Choosing a second career

145 Marketing yourself

### Related model

SWOT Personal



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