

Planning your career — get to the dream job you want

If you're ready to start a new career or take the next step in your existing field, you'll likely want to do some career planning. Planning your career will help you create and identify your career goals along with planning out the steps that you need to take to get to where you want to be. Career planning is a great professional development tool to take part in, even if you're not actively job searching.

Explore the steps for planning your career to get started on your career development journey

Who needs to engage in career planning?

The term "career planning" may make you think of working with a guidance counselor to pick a college major and career path while in high school, but career planning is something that you'll likely need to engage in at several key points throughout your career. Whether you're looking for your first job, ready to change careers, or evaluating your next career step in an established field, career planning can help set you up for success.

Here are several common reasons that you may want to start planning your career:

1. **You're looking to start a new career.** Whether you're in school and thinking about what you want to do after you graduate or hoping to pivot to a new career after years in a different field, planning your career can help you work towards your ideal role. At this stage it may be a more exploratory process where you will likely want to research and consider several potential roles and career paths, then through the career planning process you can identify the best fit and then create an action plan on how to get started in your chosen field.
2. **You're already established in a career, but want to figure out your next step.** Career planning doesn't have to be part of a career change or job search. It can also be a tool for deciding how to advance within your existing career, or even with your current employer. Many people engage in career planning to work towards an internal promotion, in which case it can be a collaborative process with your manager.
3. **You're not sure what you want.** Sometimes you reach a point where you feel stuck in your career and need to take some time to reevaluate your career goals. People in this planning stage may end up pursuing a career change or promotion later on in the process. Though they may also decide that they like their current career level but want to change employers to find a work environment that is a better fit or identify ways to make their current work feel more meaningful or challenging.

Career planning can be a short-term process to simply get you to your next job or a long-term multi-level action plan to help you climb the ladder to your ultimate dream job (and salary).

Steps for planning your career

While the end destination of the career planning journey may vary. The basic step-by-step process below can be adapted to fit any career management needs or goals.

1. Think about what you want in a career

Take some time to think about how you'd envision your ideal role or career path. Where possible, it's helpful to draw on past work experiences to get a better picture of what you would or would not like to do. If you need some help brainstorming, consider these self-assessment questions:

- What aspects of past roles or work environments have you most enjoyed?
- What aspects of past roles or work environments have you disliked?
- What are your biggest strengths?
- What do people say that you are good at?
- Do you prefer to work alone or with others?
- Do you have an interest in managing others?
- Do you want to be able to work from home?
- How do you prioritize factors such as pay, scheduling flexibility, job stability, and personal fulfillment?

These questions will work for most people regardless of their career level. It's alright if your past roles aren't related to what you think you'd like to do in the future. Those making a career change or students who have limited job experience can still use their past experiences to look for general themes in their professional likes and dislikes.

Once you've figured out your broader ideas, try to sit down and identify some more specific targets. For example, instead of something like "I want to earn more money", work to develop a specific salary number or range that would align with your needs and desired lifestyle.

2. Research your career options

Once you've narrowed in a bit more on what you want, start researching specific job titles in career paths that would be a good fit. This process will look a bit different depending on your goals and where you're at in your career.

While researching, make note of the required qualifications and job responsibilities for these roles. Sometimes, something sounds like a dream job in theory but isn't actually a strong fit when you narrow in on the requirements. For example, if you decided in step one that you want a job where you can help others, a doctor

may seem like a good choice. However, if you aren't comfortable with the cost and time commitment required for medical school and residency, you'll want to dig deeper into alternatives with lower training requirements.

Don't forget to consider the current job market when evaluating options. The Bureau of Labor Statistics is a good resource for doing some quick introductory research on what fields are growing and how much they pay. You will also want to research current issues impacting the career fields that you have an interest in. For example, the use of AI is currently a hot topic across several industries and may impact the job outlook in select career fields.

3. Compare potential career paths

Once you've done your research, spend some time comparing the possible career options that you identified. Feel free to make a spreadsheet or draw up a chart if that helps you compare and contrast the different options that you've identified. Consider the job responsibilities, average salaries, what additional training or education you'd need, and any additional attributes that are important to you personally and professionally.

Sometimes the choice is fairly clear, either based on the required qualifications, potential salary, or just your gut feeling about what choice seems like the best fit. If you're stuck between a couple options, do some more hands-on career exploration. Job shadowing and informational interviews are two great ways to get more in-depth looks at possible job options or career paths. Informational interviews in particular are not only a great way to get your questions about certain jobs answered, but you can also obtain valuable career advice to help you in your career planning process.

4. Set SMART goals

Once you've compared career paths and made a decision, it's time to finalize your career goals. Break things down into several goals such as completing skills training required for your desired role, improving performance in a certain area to qualify for a promotion, etc. The best goal-setting method is to use S.M.A.R.T. goals.

These goals are meant to be:

- **Specific.** Be specific about what you want to accomplish. Include details about how you will accomplish the goal where possible. For example, instead of writing something like "I will learn Excel", you would want to write something specific such as "I will improve my Excel skills by completing an Excel for Business course online through Coursera."
- **Measurable.** Define how you will measure progress towards each goal and include quantitative targets where applicable.
- **Achievable.** Make sure that the goals that you are setting are realistic and achievable.
- **Relevant.** The goals need to be relevant to the career you are working towards. Setting personal development goals is also great, but separate those from your career planning goals.
- **Timely.** All of the goals that you set should have a clearly defined time-frame. You can't necessarily plan when you will get hired or promoted to a new role if that is part of your career success plan, but you can set deadlines for activities like completing training, sending out a certain number of job applications, or joining a networking group for your desired field.

5. Create an action plan

Finish the process out by writing out your career plan. Use the S.M.A.R.T. goals detailed above to build your career plan. List out your action items in order and compile a timeline for achieving them.

This should be created and stored in a manner that will be easy for you to keep track of. Many people like checklists or spreadsheets while others like to add deadlines or tasks to their calendar. Choose the method that works best for you and keep going as you pursue your career goals.