

CAREER

Chart Your Course

Your career is your creation. So when was the last time you really gave serious thought and time to planning it? If you can't remember, is it because:

- You are too busy doing this job to think about the next?
- You don't know what you want to do next?
- You are waiting for your manager to make the first move?
- You think the future is too uncertain for career planning?

Too many people allow one or more of these thoughts to delay or even paralyze their actions. They wait. For certainty. For their bosses to provide career maps. For a revelation about the next step. For a "time-out" from the current work, to ponder the next. The truth is that only you can make the time and the decisions that put your career on the right course. The payoff? Greater work satisfaction.

I had done a great job here for twelve years. I knew that I'd be promoted eventually. I waited for the promotion and when it didn't come, I finally asked my boss about it. He said, "Sorry, but in addition to your work experience, that

job now requires a special technical certificate.” I had watched some colleagues taking those classes, but just didn’t realize it was such a big deal. This past year I took the classes and earned the certificate. Recently I finally got that promotion. Now I’ve gone “public” with my career goals. I talk about them with my boss and am constantly looking for ways to attain them.

Whose Career Is It, Anyway?

You *own* your career. This attitude will help you get what you want from work. Take steps now to plan it, build it, and strengthen it. Here’s how:

- *Look at yourself*—Examine your interests, values, and work skills. Find out, too, if others see you the way you see yourself.
- *Look around*—Uncover trends (company/industry), learning pathways (ways to learn new skills), and multiple career options.
- *Look ahead*—Identify goals, alliances, support. Create your plan.

Talk with colleagues, friends, and bosses. Identify and collaborate with people interested in helping you. Think about how you, in turn, can help them. Use them as sounding boards to test your ideas, career options, and assumptions.

Here’s Lookin’ at You

Assess. It’s the critical first step in successfully managing your career.

Know Yourself

What do you love to do? To create a meaningful career pathway, you need to be clear about your interests (the things you like doing—ideas and activities that give fulfillment and pleasure) and your values (ideals you cherish that guide your life at work). Determine those critical variables. **Interview yourself:**

- ✓ What accomplishments at work have made me feel particularly proud?
- ✓ What makes me feel unique in this organization?
- ✓ What kinds of things would I do if I could create my ideal workday?
- ✓ What types of work do I avoid?

The things you do well, value highly, and like doing give you a basic map for planning your career. Look for opportunities to do that *inside* your organization.

Know Your Strengths

What are your key skills (effective abilities and/or behaviors used to produce clear results)? How do you know? **Interview yourself and three others (teammates, boss, friends):**

- ✓ What are my towering strengths? (Very few people are as good as I am.)
- ✓ What are my moderate strengths? (I'm good—so are many others.)
- ✓ How would customers (internal or external) describe me?

Are you using your key skills? Most people we know are not unhappy because of the skills they are using—but because of the skills they are not using.

Know which of your skills is irreplaceable!—Dick Bolles, author of What Color Is Your Parachute?

Know What You Need to Learn

Given your interests, what do you need/want to learn? Ask yourself. Also, gather information from three willing feedback providers:

- ✓ What are my overdone strengths? (too much of a good thing)

I am bottom-line oriented. I get results. The problem is that in getting there, I sometimes run over people.

- ✓ What are two skills I should strengthen? How would it help me, given what I want to do?

My career goal is to move up in this organization. Two of my strengths are that I'm detail oriented and very independent. I've always figured I had to do it myself if I wanted it done right. Now I'm hearing that I need to learn to "manage through others"—not do it myself—if I hope to move into management positions. I need to develop some new strengths.

Seek out your critics. Listen to them. Try to see yourself through their eyes. Get clear about your missing skills or those skills you overdo.

Lookin' Around

Once you've assessed what you need to learn, you can begin to look around your organization for trends, learning pathways, and career options. You may be surprised to find projects, task forces, and jobs that will support your goals.

Trend Tracking

What do you know about your organization, your industry, and your profession? If you don't know the answers to these questions, ask others:

- What are the major industry, economic, political, and social changes taking place that will affect this organization?
- What are the opportunities and problems ahead?
- How will my profession be different in two years? In five years?
- What counts for success here? How will that change in the future?

Read company newsletters and industry journals. Search for Web sites that discuss your industry. Bookmark them and check them regularly.

Learning Pathways: The 70-20-10 Rule

How do adults learn? One well-known answer (described by the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina) suggests the following:

- ✓ 70 percent of adult learning happens by doing. On-the-job challenges, risky situations, and stretch assignments all contribute to success at work.
- ✓ 20 percent of adult learning comes from others. Mentors, role models, feedback providers, and coaches help us develop and excel.
- ✓ 10 percent of adult learning happens in the classroom, from books, tapes, or on-line learning activities.

So, choose a learning pathway that works for you and will best develop the skill you're trying to learn. Try this:

- ✓ Offer to serve on a project team or task force that will help you develop a skill or make key connections.
- ✓ Agree to a tough assignment. Be sure to ask for support from those who've been there and/or done that.
- ✓ Find a mentor to teach you the specific skill you're hoping to learn.
- ✓ Take a class (ask about education reimbursement options), or read a couple of books on the topic of interest.

Ask yourself, "What do I want to learn next? How/where/ from whom can I learn it?"

Options, Options, Options

Not every step in a career has to be a step up. *Up* is one way to go, but there are other options (inside the organization) to consider, too. Talk to your boss or other valued advisors to learn about these possibilities:

- *Moving laterally*—a change in job, but not necessarily a change in level of responsibility
- *Exploring*—testing and researching changes without permanent commitment
- *Enriching*—seeding the current job with more chances to learn and grow
- *Realigning*—adjusting duties to reconcile them with other priorities and future possibilities

Try to imagine at least one move you could make in each of these directions. What would it look like? How might it match your skills, interests, and values?

Now, Create the Plan

Use the information you now have about you, your company, and multiple options to develop your career goals. Those goals will become the cornerstone of an action plan, so take care to make them specific and achievable.

Answer these questions:

- What new skills, knowledge, or abilities do I need to achieve my goals?
- What are some short-term goals (three to six months) that I could start on right now?
- How can I gain the new skills that will help me with my goals while in my *current* job?
- What relevant experiences can I have through serving on committees and task forces?
- Who in my network can help?

A clear plan of action turns goals into realities if you take these steps:

- ✓ Write down your goals, exact steps, and deadlines. Revise along the way.
- ✓ Forge alliances with people who can help you reach your goals: managers, mentors, peers, supporters.
- ✓ Seek learning. Get training and experience to help you reach your goals.

I read a book about career planning and decided to fill in the blanks and develop a plan, including specific action steps. Six months later, I had not taken a single action! It was like my New Year's resolution—so easy to disregard. Finally, a friend in another department told me some of

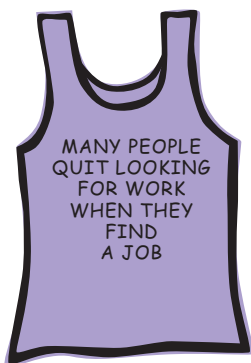
her career goals, and I unearthed my action plan to show her. Right away she pointed out items that were simply unrealistic or didn't sound like me. With her feedback, I adjusted my plan and sought another approach that made more sense.



Charting your course can feel like an overwhelming task, somewhere between keeping New Year's resolutions and raising the *Titanic*. Yet, it's doable if you look at yourself, look around, and look ahead. What you learn goes into your plan. Obviously you'll need allies, relevant projects, and an organization that values what you do. But you're in charge of your career. You manage it within your company, within this economy, and with the capabilities and resources that you have.

If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.

—Anonymous



Seen in a Jacksonville, FL bookstore.