

# How to Set Career Goals and Plan Out Your Professional Future

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## FULL TEXT

In brief

- \* Take the initiative. Don't wait to be asked.
- \* Your goals should be actionable, measurable and achievable.
- \* Be practical, but don't be afraid to take risks.

Setting goals is essential to advancing your career and feeling fulfilled by your job. Whether your employer requires you to set goals as part of your performance-review process or it is something you do voluntarily once a year with a pen and paper in your living room, it can help you to plan out your professional future. It can also help you to stretch yourself and might make negotiating a raise easier, career-development experts say.

### 1. Take the initiative in setting your future goals.

Don't wait for a manager or mentor to ask you what your goals are. Get ahead by brainstorming and crafting your professional goals independently.

Tony Lee, a recruitment-trends expert and vice president of editorial for the Society for Human Resource Management, says younger people such as recent high school or college graduates may be used to waiting for assignments from teachers, parents and other authority figures, but now is the time to become a self-starter.

"If they're too acclimated to that culture then they're going to sit back in the job and wait for someone to come to them and say, 'OK, here's an assignment that is due by this date,' rather than take the initiative and ask, 'What can I do?'" says Mr. Lee.

Motivating yourself can also be a challenge if you have been doing the same job for many years, but there are some ways to prepare.

Before you jump in:

- \* Take stock of where you are. Find any goals you may have set in the past and assess where you are now. Did you meet those goals? Do they still align with your career path? Looking at your past objectives may help you set your next round of goals.
- \* Talk to somebody you trust. Ask a boss, mentor, professor or someone else who knows your professional strengths for help with your goal-setting.
- \* Find some examples. Ask your colleagues or people you admire what goals they have set and met in past years.

If you are concerned how to broach the topic with your manager, keep in mind that they are likely to support your advancement. Mr. Lee recommends approaching the conversation by saying: "I really like my job, but two or three years from now, I don't think either of us want me to still be doing the same thing." You could follow up with: "What can I do now to help prepare myself for the next opportunity?"

### 2. Calculate your professional value to develop goals.

Think about what you bring to the table. Figuring out what you do well will also help you discern what you should work on. For example, if you are an Uber driver who has just completed several record-breaking earning days, calculate the amount you made and set a timeline by which you will double your daily earnings. If you are an account manager who signed 30 new clients last year, make a plan to focus on retention of those clients.

Avoid focusing entirely on skills that benefit you. Aim for the intersection between goals that serve you and your

employer or client. This will work to your advantage when the time comes to ask for a pay raise or promotion.

"If I can see a direct path to somebody adding more referrals, creating more testimonials, making more sales or eliminating costs, I will happily pay you \$5,000 or \$10,000 dollars more," says career coach Tracy Timm, "because you've made a really strong case for your value."

Your goals should be:

- \* Actionable. Think about what you can do to achieve your goal.

- \* Example: To achieve my goal of building better relationships with higher-ups, I will participate in my company's mentorship program.

- \* Measurable. Find a metric that would clearly demonstrate success. This could be a sales target, an amount of time you will dedicate to a goal or the amount of money you want to earn.

- \* Example: To achieve my goal of increasing the number of clients we have, I will set up three meetings a week with existing clients to talk about referrals.

- \* Realistic. Don't go overboard. The idea is to be able to achieve the goals you set. You should be able to visualize how you will complete them.

- \* Example: To achieve my goal of being promoted, I will work with my manager to build out a two-year timeline.

3. Be pragmatic but ambitious with your long-term goals.

Your goals should challenge you. Try to make them ambitious but achievable. Even if you don't meet your goal in the time you allot, you can re-evaluate and try again. Sometimes, says Miss Timm, it is just about giving it your best shot. "When we're older or even when we look back on our lives, it's very rare that we regret something that we did that failed," she says. "We regret more deeply the things that we never had the courage to do."

Miss Timm says she learned this lesson early in her career when she was working in the finance industry. She knew early on that the job wasn't a good fit for her, but the fear of appearing indecisive or difficult kept her from exploring other options, either with her managers or externally. By the time she finally spoke up, she was handing in her two weeks' notice. Her boss's reaction?

"They literally just started throwing resources at me," she says. She was offered training courses, conversations with HR, a transition to a different department, and even an opportunity to stay until she figured out her next step, she says.

"Imagine if I had gone to them and said, 'I really believe in what we're doing. This is just not the right fit for me. Can you help me, because I want to be happy and I want to make an impact?'"

It is never too early at a new job to start setting goals, trying to learn new skills, and looking at where you can be making changes.

Resources

- \* The S.M.A.R.T. System : This technique helps you set goals that are specific (S), measurable (M), attainable (A), relevant (R) and timely (T).

- \* LifeTick : This website helps you identify your core values and set goals, complete with email reminders to make sure you meet them. It is free for individuals with four or fewer goals.

What to do next

- \* Start thinking about setting personal metrics at work , from how often you use your phone during the day to how profitable your projects are.

- \* Listen to career coaches Marianne Ruggiero and Rita Kakati Shah discuss how to jump start your career on the Secrets of Wealthy Women podcast.

- \* Read why some academics say young women play down their career goals around men.

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Credit: By Alex Janin

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