Managing Your Career

Charting Your Course

Finding your dream job usually doesn’t happen by accident. Here’s how to plan for success.

By Wendy Enelow

In today’s highly competitive and constantly changing employment landscape, you must have an action plan to move your career forward—whether you intend to remain in human resources or to use your current HR role as a steppingstone to something else.

No matter what you hope to achieve in the working world—and, frankly, regardless of your stage of life—creating and following a strategic and tactical career plan should be high on your list of priorities.

What Is a Career Plan?
Your career plan is the strategy for how you want to move forward throughout your professional life. Maybe you aspire to reach the highest levels of HR leadership for a global consumer products company, or perhaps your plan is to segue your HR experience into operations and general management in a high-tech venture. You might even know the names of specific companies you’d like to work for or, at the very least, the industries that are of most interest to you.

Why Have a Career Plan?
A career plan gives you purpose, control and a path to follow throughout your working life. Of course, things will change and you will need to update your plan as you progress, but a plan gives you direction so that you’re certain to make wise decisions and accept the right opportunities.

When Should You Create a Career Plan?
You should have a career plan regardless of where you are on your career journey. Get started now by filling out a career path worksheet. Your plan should reflect the step-by-step progress needed to get from where you are now to where you want to be. If you’re just beginning your professional life, your path might include 7-10 jobs you would like to hold in the future. If you are further along in your career, that number will be fewer.

You might have difficulty filling in the details for all of the positions you envision having. Make the best projections you can ... and be prepared to make adjustments! Career planning is a dynamic process. You do not need to know all the answers now. But having a defined path toward a clear objective is the first step to achieving any goal.

Reviewing and Revising
Your career journey will likely be filled with twists and turns and will not follow the straightforward path you’ve outlined. That’s to be expected.
It's safe to say that just about everyone will be impacted at some point in their career by an unexpected detour, shift or transition. You might stumble upon wonderful new opportunities (e.g., a series of fast-track promotions) or not-so-wonderful obstacles (e.g., being laid off). Your challenge is to balance those twists and turns with the plan you created to bring pleasure and fulfillment into your working life.

**Career Path Interrupters**

Consider how any one of the following might affect your career plan:

- **You accept an HR position with a different company.** This is the time to re-examine your expectations about how your career might progress and the experience and educational credentials you may want to attain. Those were more well-known factors at your prior company—but now they may be different.

- **You accept a promotion or lateral transfer with your current employer.** Maybe this puts you one step closer to your pinnacle job. If so, great! Your career path is on target. But perhaps you can leapfrog one of the roles you originally laid out in your plan.

- **You are laid off, downsized or terminated.** In a flash, your career path is blocked and your expectations are upended. In my experience, a loss seems quite devastating at the start in many cases turns out to be a blessing in disguise. But you won’t know that until you land your next opportunity and reassess.

- **You choose to leave the workforce for personal reasons.** Perhaps the grind of working full time while raising children has become too much. Or a health situation, whether it’s your own or that of a loved one, might require you to step away from your job. Or maybe you win the lottery and decide to travel the world for a year! If you leave the workforce, you’ll be faced with the challenge of re-entry if you choose to come back. How that plays out—your position, company and industry after re-entry—will affect your career plan.

**Circumstances force you to make a career move.** A merger reduces the scope and influence of your role. A difficult boss makes your work life untenable. A corporate relocation prompts you to look for a new job that doesn’t require you to move … or your spouse’s job dictates your own relocation. Suddenly, the career path you planned is taking an unexpected turn, so it’s time to adapt!

**When to Revisit and Revise**

When you are ready to move your career forward, whether you’re returning from a career path interrupter or simply taking the next step toward your pinnacle job, revisit your career plan and make any needed adjustments.

Even if things are going just as you envisioned, it’s a good idea to sit down at least once per year to review and confirm that the path you’ve defined is still accurate and realistic.

Review what you wrote and ask yourself these questions:

- Is the pinnacle job I described still my ultimate career goal? Is it accurate as written, or should I make adjustments?
- Do I need to update my current position information?
- Do the steps I’ve outlined still seem reasonable and realistic? Can I add any details to those steps? Can I cross off any of the needed experience or educational requirements that I previously listed?
- Given what I know now that I didn’t know then, do I need to revise the timeline I established? Should I add any new knowledge, education or other requirements to the qualifications I’ll need?

This review could be a quick check-in or it could represent a major rethinking of your career goals and path. People change, circumstances shift, the work environment evolves. You don’t want to be blindly toiling toward a goal that is unrealistic or no longer meaningful for you.

Plus, keeping tabs on your progress is a great confidence-builder. When you have a plan and you know you are making progress toward a goal, it’s easier to deal with the ups and downs of every job. You’ll be able to make smart decisions when opportunities arise and react quickly to changing circumstances.

If you devote time, effort, introspection and honesty to the task, your career plan will remain a living document that helps align your current reality with your ultimate pinnacle position.

Wendy Enelow is a master resume writer and a job and career transition coach. Have a question for her about writing resumes, LinkedIn profiles and other career communications? E-mail queries to YourCareerQA@shrm.org. Enelow also offers a paid executive resume writing service. For more information, visit www.wendyenelow.com.