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A ROADMAP FOR YOUR FUTURE: HOW TO DEVELOP A CAREER PLAN

When you started your career, you were energized and excited. You looked forward to going to work each morning. And you had big plans for the future. But now, years later, you realize that you're simply not where you wanted to be professionally. What can you do?

It's time to develop a career plan.

A career plan can help you take control of your career, set goals, and monitor progress. Such a plan forces you to evaluate your current position (whether you're unemployed or in an unfulfilling job) and your target position, and then determine how you will move from one to the other. In short, a career plan can help you get back on course – and reach your destination faster.

Here are five steps to developing an effective career plan:

Step #1: Determine what you really want out of your career.

It's easier to start at your destination and work backwards, so ask yourself: what is your ultimate career goal? To become a CFO? To start your own accounting firm? To become a Sarbanes Oxley expert? Once you have a solid idea of where you want to go, you'll be able to develop the right plan to get there.

Step #2: Do some research.

Research the skills, training, and experience necessary to achieve your ultimate career goal. Determine what skills and strengths you already have, and what you still need to learn and develop. The information you garner from this step will help you identify the specific actions you need to take on the road to success and fulfillment.

Step #3: Create an action plan.

Now that you know what you need in terms of skills and experience to achieve your ultimate career goal, what do you need to do to get there? Break your career plan down into goals you can reach in 3 – 6 months, 6 – 12 months, 1 – 2 years, and 3 – 5 years. This breakdown will make your plan easier for you to follow.

Here's an example of an action plan for someone who eventually wants to work in a management position, such as CFO:

3 – 6 Months:

(Include some short-term goals that are easy to achieve but will also help you move toward your long-term goal. Be as specific as possible.)



Example: "Start reading books about leadership and management."

6 – 12 Months:

(Start thinking a little bit bigger here. What skills do you want to learn to help you achieve your ultimate career goal and how will you acquire them?)

Example: "Participate in employer's mentoring program. Also, volunteer for a leadership position in an industry or community association."

1 – 2 Years:

(Don't be afraid to push yourself, but also be realistic about your goals.)

Example: "Find out if employer offers tuition reimbursement. Regardless, begin classes working towards an MBA degree."

3 – 5 Years:

(Include specific goals you know may take more than a year or two to accomplish.)

Example: "Complete degree. Apply for open management position within company. Update resume if no open positions are available."

Step #4: Build your network.

Develop a strong network of contacts. For instance, partners at accounting or finance firms and people on boards of directors. Go out of your way to meet those people and to develop relationships with them.

In this step, you have to change your personal focus from inward to outward, which may force you out of your comfort zone. However, an effective network can help you accelerate your career.

Step # 5: Review your plan regularly.

Your career plan should be a fluid and evolving one that is reviewed and refined over time as your circumstances change. Be sure you look over your plan at least once a quarter and check off any goals or actions you've accomplished. Also, be open to changing elements in your plan if doing so will help you reach your destination faster.

Conclusion:

Developing a strong career plan will help you make strategic and focused moves. It will allow you to act with purpose and confidence. And when the job market is rough, the people who know where they're going will ultimately perform better.