

Career Mapping: Charting an Employee's Path to Success

Strategic plans are essential for any company to succeed. They guide leaders and employees in their decision making and help ensure everyone understands and meets objectives. This type of formal document can be just as valuable for those in your department when it comes to their professional

aspirations. Everyone from accounts payable clerks to senior accountants and managers needs to have a detailed path in mind in order to achieve their goals.

As a supervisor, you can provide critical guidance to employees through career mapping. With this process, you collaborate with individuals on your team to set long-term objectives and detail the steps required to accomplish them.

There are a number of benefits to career mapping. By offering this service, you demonstrate to employees that you care about their advancement potential and want to see them succeed, which can increase their job satisfaction and ultimately their productivity. At the same time, you help build a loyal workforce that's dedicated to making a contribution to your organization now and in the future.

Perform an assessment

To begin the career-mapping process, give staff members a worksheet that includes the following categories: values, working style, strengths, and weaknesses. Next to each category, leave space for the employees to list related priorities and qualities they can rank on a scale of one to five, with five indicating the point most important to them. Here's what to address specifically in each of the sections.



- **Values.** Staff members should write down what matters to them personally when they think about their careers. For instance, they might list having a mentor, competitive compensation, work/life balance, access to the latest financial software applications, or a collaborative work environment.
- **Working style.** This should cover the types of projects your employees enjoy, the amount of diversity they require in their assignments, how much professional challenge they want, as well as their need for creative

outlets and stability.

- *Strengths and weaknesses.* Ask staff members to think about their previous on-the-job performance. The category should help employees identify areas of expertise as well as skills or qualities they need to improve (which may be potential action items). A rating of “one” would represent a minor strength or weakness while a “five” would indicate a pronounced strength or weakness.

Schedule a special meeting with each employee to discuss the worksheet and prepare a career map. It’s helpful to find out whether an accounting professional already has an objective in mind so you can analyze the comments listed on the document more effectively.

For instance, a senior accountant may have noted an interest in supervising employees, traveling more to

the company’s other locations, and helping to oversee work with independent auditors. Her strengths include technology expertise, an analytical mind-set, and communication abilities, and she values intellectual challenge. All of these comments suggest a solid match to her goal of becoming an assistant controller. You might also point out other paths she may not have considered that would also suit her skills and interests. For instance, the same qualities would also make her a good candidate for an audit director or accounting manager position.

Devise a strategy

After you’ve brainstormed all of the possibilities, narrow them down to one professional objective. Then develop a plan for achieving this goal. To become an assistant controller, for example, the accountant may need to gain leadership experience and earn a master’s degree in business administration or an accreditation, such as becoming a Certified Management Accountant (CMA).

Prepare a list of action items based on current weaknesses or skills gaps. Be sure each step is quantifiable: “Attend seminars or classes in business negotiation, human resources, and team building by the end of the year” provides better direction than “pursue management training.” Each goal should have a clear deadline as well.

Provide support

Once you’ve developed a career map, make sure there are no obstacles to the employee’s success. If you have advised an accounting professional to gain experience with enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems but don’t adjust the person’s workload to accommodate the necessary projects,

the plan may be ineffective.

Agree upon a time to review the action items—once a quarter, for example—to ensure the employee has adequate support. Provide feedback on his or her progress, and modify the plan as necessary. Keep in mind that it’s not uncommon for someone to begin work toward a particular goal and decide it isn’t the right path after all. You may need to map several new courses during an individual’s tenure at your organization.

Consider pairing the employee with someone in the company who works in the desired role. For instance, one of your firm’s assistant controllers can share insights into the day-to-day responsibilities and challenges of the position, as well as provide training in specific areas.

Career planning is a useful way to support your employees’ professional development and enhance their contributions to your company. With a clear plan in mind, staff members will better understand how their work is contributing to their long-term goals and ambitions. The time you invest in this process now will help ensure your company has qualified internal candidates to fill senior-level positions in the future. ■

*Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. (RHI), parent company of Robert Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world’s first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer’s most recent books are *Motivating Employees For Dummies®* and *Managing Your Career For Dummies®* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).*