

# Personalize Your Career Development Plan

Proactive, ongoing personal career management is a necessity in today's economy. To get started, two very important steps are candid self-assessment and a thoughtful, personalized development plan design.

Recent economic calamities have forced many of us to stop and evaluate the present status and predicted trajectory of our careers. This is true whether we were caught in those infamous headwinds and are now searching the horizon for an appropriate new opportunity or we're among those who have survived the recent flurries of layoffs.

Previous workplace generations were counseled that doing their job well and observing a common set of rules for behavior on the job would guarantee long-term career success, job security, and financial rewards even into retirement. "Managing your career" was something you didn't need to think about after securing that promising entry-level position. A career path was a predestined course where following the rules inevitably triggered linear progression to more senior organizational positions.

Obviously, that has changed.

Today, the definition of a career path has expanded to include the

options of multiple paths, working a series of positions that don't necessarily build on one another, or choosing, within one employer's ranks, a nonlinear path to develop and master new competencies.

What these changes mean is that being proactive in the management of your own career path is now an absolute necessity. Two basic starting points of an ongoing career management plan include a realistic assessment of accomplishments and weaknesses followed by thoughtful, customized design of a personal learning and self-development plan.

## Career Assessment

Substantiating the progress of your own career growth is something few professionals actually take the time to do. You make an attempt to summarize actual progress each time you update your résumé, but how many of you actually have documents to support the career accomplishments your résumé attempts to convey? Collecting this documentation on a habitual, ongoing basis may be the most practical approach.

Two types of documentation are particularly helpful when conducting a self-assessment: performance reviews and corre-

spondence or reports that show evidence of your success in the workplace.

Performance reviews are an excellent reference because they are a supervisor's opportunity to recount both strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, important trends may be revealed if multiple performance reviews are available from different supervisors for various past positions and employers.

Choosing samples for the second type of documentation requires an inquisitive and honest memory search. Examples could include that complimentary note a grateful client sent when you were particularly helpful, your own written explanation to a superior or coworker about how you solved a very difficult or unique problem, or a report you totally revamped to feature more meaningful information, preferably paired with the format it replaced. To enable a more balanced self-assessment, you should also gather suggestions to improve your skills or take specific classes.

Aside from the workplace-centric input described above, consider personal interactions, such as the observations of friends and former coworkers who've known you for a while. Their per-

spective could add a valuable third dimension as you mold your overall assessment. Imagine that you could gather the four or five people who've known you the best over the past 10 years. What would be their consensus if they were asked the following questions?

- ◆ What personal quality is the first feature they would mention about you?
- ◆ What skill or talent would they most likely credit for your future success?
- ◆ What shortcoming would they predict might hold you back?

## Development Planning

To build a foundation for developing the actual personalized plan, you'll first need to do some introspection to ascertain what career goals and personal preferences are important to you. For example, if regular public contact is highly predictable considering your career goals, you may naturally conclude that public speaking skills are important. They may be even more critical if encounters are typically contentious. As another example, if expert-level proficiency with highly specialized industry-specific software doesn't appeal to you, then perhaps you

## Multifaceted Demographic Effects

Shifting demographic trends, such as the marked growth in the Hispanic population and the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, have multiple implications for your career development. For example, refreshing your understanding of Spanish may help as you find yourself among an increasing number of Hispanic coworkers, but what about that population's specific preferences for products and services? Are you working for an employer that has adapted to those preferences? Is your specialized skill set marketable to a savvy employer that's making these adaptations ahead of the competition?

could opt for those higher-level software demonstrations simply to get an awareness of the capabilities and limitations that coworkers or direct reports face in their work.

Other skills to consider bringing up to par include written communication effectiveness, workforce diversity issue awareness, fluency in foreign languages relevant to your market, the most current career-specific technical points, and, of course, those perennially sought people management skills.

You may find that your current expertise in some transferable skill already affords you an edge over the competition for that desired next position because the position targeted has a definite or critical need for such talent. In this case,

your strategy might be to pursue enhanced exposure and visibility of this particular aptitude while simultaneously considering strategic specialization of the skill. For example, if written communication abilities are pivotal, then publishing articles in trade journals may be a good way to expose your talent, particularly if the subject matter is relevant to an industry or employer you're targeting—and that grant writing course you've been considering would probably be of interest to the research-intensive organization that's on your target employer list.

## Getting Started

Taking time to do a self-assessment and to customize your own personal learning and development plan is important. These are logical first steps for managing your own career. Other efforts are also important, but these two provide a good foundation.

*You* are the one in command. Take charge of your career! **SF**

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## Career Coaching

As opposed to typical corporate leadership development programs, using a career coach reaps the benefit of truly individualized help. An employer may offer career coaches for top-level personnel and middle management, or they may be privately contracted. They will familiarize themselves with a trainee's job and current level of performance and will assist the trainee in developing performance objectives, establishing plans, and setting deadlines. At the end of their engagement, they offer feedback on the level of improvement.