

Planning Your Career

In order to work towards long-term career goals, it is important that you plan ahead. This article provides suggestions for planning your future career, by preparing a Road Map document. The road map can be used as a guideline and motivating tool for developing your career.

It should be emphasized that life often holds surprises and that you cannot plan for everything. However, having a clear idea of where you are and where you want to go is an important element in achieving your long-term objectives.

Developing a Road Map

A road map provides a visualization of where you see your career as going in the long-term, with visible milestones or objectives along the way. A road map also helps you deal with the ups and downs you currently face, by enabling you to focus on the big picture, or long-term perspective. A road map is similar to a business plan for a company. You use it to outline your current assets and develop a plan for expanding your skills.

Before writing the road map, ask yourself the following questions?

- Why did you choose to enter this career and are you achieving what you set out to achieve?
- What essential skills and knowledge do you have?
- What are your relative advantages/strengths (when compared to other technical communicators)?
- What are your weaker areas, which could do with more development?
- Where do you see yourself as being in the next five years? How do you plan to achieve this? What are the obstacles in the way of your achieving your goals?

Think carefully about the answers to these questions, which you will later use to plan your road map. An example of a road map is included in this article.

Sample Road Map

Mission Statement

The mission statement summarizes the main vision or primary goal of your road map. It can be paraphrased as where would you like to see yourself being in five years time.

For Susan Smith, her mission statement is:

To set up and run my own successful contracting business

The mission statement should be clear and concise. It crystallizes in a single idea the main idea to which you want to approach. This may be stated in general or abstract terms, such as:

- *To become a respected expert in my area of specialty*
- *To enter a leadership or managerial position*
- *To learn a wide range of skills that could be applied to many different contexts*

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- *To develop the skills that can help me market and sell my services*
- *To become an expert on knowledge management/ XML based applications*
- *To develop article writing as a supplementary source of income*

The mission statement helps you focus on the big picture.

Objectives

Based on the mission statement, write down the concrete objectives that can help you fulfill your mission statement. For Susan Smith, these objectives are:

- Find out how to set up and run a private contracting business
- Take courses in small business management or marketing
- Build up contacts and initial contracts
- Write out a business plan

Current status – Where you are and where you see yourself going

This section describes what you are currently doing.

For Susan, this is:

Working on a full-time basis for a company as a technical writer.

Susan has been working for several years on a full-time basis. This is her second company. She has gained enough experience of her profession to feel secure enough to offer her services on a free-lance basis. Although Susan is comfortable in her current position, she wants to have more time to spend with her young children. Working for home on a contract basis will enable her to retain her current salary level, while working for fewer hours, and enabling her to spend more time with the kids. She enjoys the variety and challenges of working on different projects.

Current Skills

Write down all the skills that you currently use or are competent at. When looking at your skill set, it may help to break this down into categories.

Susan prepared the following list of skills:

A) Core competencies

- Excellent writing and communication skills
- Good team player
- Good interviewing skills
- Good time management and organizational skills

B) Knowledge of tools:

- FrameMaker

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- Knowledge of HTML
- MS Word
- Visio

C) Knowledge of document types:

- Technical documents (user guides, API documents, white papers)
- Marketing documents (brochures, case studies)
- Online help

D) Knowledge of Technology fields:

- CAD design
- Digital video

Skills I'd Like to Learn

This section lists all the skills that you would like to learn, which you think can enhance your career.

Susan decided that the best way for her to reach her long-term objectives would be to do a part-time course in small business management and marketing. This would enable her to eventually set up as a private contractor, and provide the flexibility and work-life balance she was after.

Future Status

This is a wish-list or vision statement, which states where you see yourself as being in two, three or five years from now (you can select your own timescales, but it should be long enough to be able to reasonably fulfill your objectives).

Susan, for example, knows that it would be unrealistic to expect herself to achieve her long-term career objective of setting up as a private contractor within the next 6 months, so she aims to give herself 12 months to set up, and a further 12 months to establish herself.

Her vision statement is therefore to be running a successful and profitable private contracting business within two years.

Planned Development

This section indicates the steps you intend to take to reach your future objectives. This should include clearly defined milestones.

For example, For Susan, she broke down her plan into the following stages or milestones:

Step 1 – Find out about available courses; shortlist and select a suitable course.

Step 2 – Devote 3 hours per week to the course, over a period of 3-4 months.

Step 3 – Start networking and planning for going into contracting

Step 4 – Leave her current permanent job and work on contracts.

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Step 5 –Build up the business and get in new contracts

The important element in drawing up your milestones is to keep each milestone or step short and easily achievable. A particular objective may be rather daunting and seem almost impossible, if viewed as a straight jump to an end-point. However, if you break this end-point down into several smaller steps along the way, you are more likely to be able to motivate yourself and make progress through each stage towards your final goal.

Conclusion

Planning your career through the use of a road map can be a powerful tool in helping you decide what you want to achieve out of your career and providing you with concrete steps and motivation to get there.

A roadmap can take whatever form you choose, but it is important to formalise and write it down. Break down your goals into small, easy-to-manage and achievable steps. By referring back to your roadmap during the year, you can check your progress towards reaching your career goals. You can tick off milestones as you pass them.

The journey through your roadmap can be both a rewarding and motivating experience.

As many philosophers have often stated, it is sometimes not the end goal that is important, so much as the journey and how you get there.