

How to set professional development goals (with examples)

As you leave student life and venture into full-time work, you might find yourself wondering, *what's next?* Perhaps you're not sure which direction you want your career to take, or you're looking to give your future some structure.

Setting professional development goals is one way to help ensure you've got a clear idea of what you want from your career and that you're always working towards your aspirations.

If you like the idea of progressing in your chosen field or simply increasing your earning capacity as you gain more experience in the workforce, it helps to set [professional development goals](#). Also called career development goals or PDP goals, these are objectives you set for yourself that help drive your career forward. They include things like learning new skills, gaining knowledge and [expanding your network](#).

In this article, we cover how to set effective career development goals, and give you examples to use as a guide for your own professional [development plan](#).

Examples of professional development goals

Professional development goals are career-related targets you set for yourself. They should align with your [five-year plan](#) and where you'd like to see your career heading down the track. You don't need to have a clear idea of where you see yourself in the future to set PDP goals, a general idea is enough.

To give you an idea of what your PDP goals might look like, here are three examples for people in three different career stages. After that, we cover the steps to creating your own professional development goals.

Example 1: Junior employee seeking promotion

If you're an entry-level or junior employee looking to get ahead in your organisation, you may want to set goals that help you gain new skills. Your short-term targets could include working on your soft skills, like [communication](#) and time management, as well as gaining more hard skills, like mastering software specific to your field. In this early stage of your career, your overall goal should be to take whatever opportunities you can to expand your skill set.

Setting a wide range of PDP goals when you're just starting out gives you a good foundation of skills and knowledge to build on. By learning diverse skills across different areas you also get an idea of your [personal](#) and professional strengths, which can help guide your career plans down the line.

Example 2: Mid-career professional wanting a leadership role

At the mid-career stage you have around a decade of experience behind you. The next logical step in your career might be to move into a management or supervisory role. You could set career development goals that see you take on more responsibility, like leading a team project, [becoming a mentor](#) or organising a work event. Or you could take an online course in people management to learn different management styles.

In the mid-career stage, you should have a fairly wide professional network. You could set the short-term goal of reaching out to your network for leadership opportunities outside of your organisation. Someone with a limited professional circle might set a PDP goal of [attending networking events](#).

Example 3: Senior executive targeting industry change

It's not unusual for people to seek a career change after working in one industry for several years. While it's not always easy to jump into a new industry at a senior level, someone with more work experience is likely to have lots of [transferable skills](#) and a wider professional network to draw on.

A senior executive looking to pivot their career might set PDP goals around acquiring new technical skills. They might need to complete a course in their new field or do

some on the job training in a different department in their organisation. Adding industry events to their PDP goals might help expand their professional circle in the relevant direction.

Step 1: Self-assessment and reflection

So you want to create your own professional development goals, but don't know where to start? Before putting anything down, do some self-assessment and reflection. Look at where you are now, assess your [strengths and weaknesses](#), and consider your interests and aspirations. Are there skills you feel you could improve upon? What are you good at or passionate about? Which industry or job role speaks to you? Your PDP goals should help bridge the gap between where you are and where you see your future self.

Don't worry if you're not sure what job you want to have. You can create career development goals that focus on short-term targets like becoming an effective communicator, improving your critical thinking, or [mastering other soft skills](#). Setting smaller goals will keep you motivated and moving forward until you have a better idea of your long-term aspirations.

Step 2: Setting specific and measurable goals

To give yourself the best chances of success, set [SMART](#) professional development goals. SMART stands for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based.

- **Specific:** SMART goals have a clear and precise objective.
- **Measurable:** there should be a way to measure or track your progress.
- **Achievable:** the objective should be realistically achievable in the given timeframe.
- **Relevant:** the goal should be relevant to your overall career plan.
- **Time-based:** the goal should have a clear deadline.

When setting your SMART goals, it helps to break big milestones into smaller, actionable steps. These smaller steps help keep you motivated while working towards a larger achievement. Say your long-term goal is to work as a programmer for a high-profile tech company. In the short term, your SMART goals might be focused on expanding your professional network and learning a new coding language.

Having a clear set of development goals to aim for helps you avoid feeling bored or

‘stuck’ in your career as you’re always working towards something bigger and better.

Step 3: Aligning goals with career path

To make sure that your professional development goals are beneficial to your long-term plans, it’s important to make sure they align with your desired career path. For example, if you want to make the switch to a role that requires more soft skills, there’s not much point in developing your technical abilities. Or if you always wanted to become a specialist in your field, your PDP goals will include more subject-matter education or training rather than [learning leadership skills](#).

Step 4: Creating an action plan

Once you’ve identified career development goals, you can create a professional development plan to help you reach them. Break bigger goals down into smaller, actionable steps. For example, say your goal is to become a bar manager. Your action plan might start with researching [RSA courses](#), saving the funds needed to finance your course, then looking online for entry-level [roles in bartending](#).

It’s important to consider time and resources when drawing up a professional development plan. Take into account how long it will take to achieve each of your PDP goals and factor the time and costs into your plan.

Step 5: Seeking guidance and feedback

When creating your professional development plan, make a note of people who you can call on for support for each goal. To reach your development goals for work you might [seek mentorship](#) from a senior colleague or supervisor that you can rely on for guidance. If your goals include further education, you might ask a professor to provide feedback and advice.

Step 6: Tracking and assessing progress

If you’re using the SMART goals framework for your career development goals then your progress should be trackable and measurable. Say your goal is to expand your professional network – you can track your progress by measuring how many new connections you make.

‘Time-based’ means your goals should be reached within a certain timeframe. Conduct weekly or monthly reviews to see how well you’re doing and if your goals are achievable in the time restrictions you’ve set yourself. If you find your goals are taking longer to achieve than you thought, it could be a sign to revisit your goals and tweak them.

Step 7: Celebrating achievements

While it’s perfectly okay to hit a target and move straight onto the next one, you may find that celebrating your achievements helps give you more motivation. Recognising successes can give you a sense of pride and accomplishment, which is important when you’re working towards a long-term goal.

Step 8: Continuous learning and adaptation

Personal development is a lifelong process. Embracing a growth mindset early in your career will help you see upcoming challenges as opportunities to learn and improve. Being open to change and personal growth will serve you well in your career and at home.

Over time, your career plan may change or take an unexpected turn. Taking an adaptable approach to your personal development plan will help you in step with your end goal whatever comes your way.

Setting professional development goals is a great way to create a career path you find enjoyable and fulfilling. Reflect on where you’d like to be in the future and create a career development plan based on your interests and strengths. Set SMART goals and break big milestones into actionable steps, for the best chance of staying motivated to work towards your long-term career aspirations.