

10 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL CAREER PLANNING

Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

Career planning is not an activity that should be done once – in high school or college – and then left behind as we move forward in our jobs and careers. Rather, career planning is an activity that is best done on a regular basis – especially given the data that the average worker will change careers (not jobs) multiple times over his or her lifetime. And it's never too soon or too late to start your career planning.

Career planning is not a hard activity, not something to be dreaded or put off, but rather an activity that should be liberating and fulfilling, providing goals to achieve in your current career or plans for beginning a transition to a new career. Career planning should be a rewarding and positive experience.

Here, then, are 10 tips to help you achieve successful career planning.

1. Make Career Planning an Annual Event

Many of us have physicals, visit the eye doctor and dentist, and do a myriad of other things on an annual basis, so why not career planning? Find a day or weekend once a year – more often if you feel the need or if you're planning a major career change – and schedule a retreat for yourself. Try to block out all distractions so that you have the time to truly focus on your career – what you really want out of your career, out of your life.

By making career planning an annual event, you will feel more secure in your career choice and direction – and you'll be better prepared for the many uncertainties and difficulties that lie ahead in all of our jobs and career.

2. Map Your Path Since Last Career Planning

One of your first activities whenever you take on career planning is spending time mapping out your job and career path since the last time you did any sort of career planning. While you should not dwell on your past, taking the time to review and reflect on the path – whether straight and narrow or one filled with any curves and dead-ends – will help you plan for the future.

Once you've mapped your past, take the time to reflect on your course – and note why it looks the way it does. Are you happy with your path? Could you have done things better? What might you have done differently? What can you do differently in the future?

3. Reflect on Your Likes and Dislikes, Needs and Wants

Change is a factor of life; everybody changes, as do our likes and dislikes. Something we loved doing two years ago may now give us displeasure. So always take time to reflect on the things in your life – not just in your job – that you feel most strongly about.

Make a two-column list of your major likes and dislikes. Then use this list to examine your current job and career path. If your job and career still fall mostly in the like column, then you know you are still on the right path; however, if your job activities fall mostly in the dislike column, now is the time to begin examining new jobs and new careers.

Finally, take the time to really think about what it is you want or need from your work, from your career. Are you looking to make a difference in the world? To be famous? To become financially independent? To effect change? Take the time to understand the motives that drive your sense of success and happiness.

4. Examine Your Pastimes and Hobbies

Career planning provides a great time to also examine the activities you like doing when you're not working. It may sound a bit odd, to examine non-work activities when doing career planning, but it's not. Many times your hobbies and leisurely pursuits can give you great insight into future career paths.

Think you can't make a hobby into a career? People do it all the time. The great painter Paul Gauguin was a successful business person who painted on the side. It actually wasn't until he was encouraged by an artist he admired to continue painting that he finally took a serious look at his hobby and decided he should change careers. He was good at business, but his love was painting.

5. Make Note of Your Past Accomplishments

Most people don't keep a very good record of work accomplishments and then struggle with creating a powerful resume when it's time to search for a new job. Making

note of your past accomplishments – keeping a record of them – is not only useful for building your resume, it's also useful for career planning.

Sometimes reviewing your past accomplishments will reveal forgotten successes, one or more which may trigger researching and planning a career shift so that you can be in a job that allows you to accomplish the types of things that make you most happy and proud.

6. Look Beyond Your Current Job for Transferable Skills

Some workers get so wrapped up in their job titles that they don't see any other career possibilities for themselves. Every job requires a certain set of skills, and it's much better to categorize yourself in terms of these skill sets than be so myopic as to focus just on job titles.

For example, one job-seeker who was trying to accomplish career planning found herself stuck because she identified herself as a reporter. But once she looked beyond her job title, she could see that she had this strong collection of transferable skills – such as writing, editing, researching, investigating, interviewing, juggling multiple tasks, meeting goals and deadlines, and managing time and information – skills that could easily be applied to a wide variety of jobs in many different careers.

7. Review Career and Job Trends

Everyone makes his or her own job and career opportunities, so that even if your career is shrinking, if you have excellent skills and know how to market yourself, you should be able to find a new job. However, having information about career trends is vital to long-term career planning success.

A career path that is expanding today could easily shrink tomorrow – or next year. It's important to see where job growth is expected, especially in the career fields that most interest you. Besides knowledge of these trends, the other advantage of conducting this research is the power it gives you to adjust and strengthen your position, your unique selling proposition. One of the keys to job and career success is having a unique set of accomplishments, skills, and education that make you better than all others in your career.

8. Set Career and Job Goals

Develop a roadmap for your job and career success. Can you be successful in your career without setting goals? Of course. Can you be even more successful through goal-setting? Most research says yes.

A major component of career planning is setting short-term (in the coming year) and long-term (beyond a year) career and job goals. Once you initiate this process, another component of career planning becomes reviewing and adjusting those goals as your career plans progress or change – and developing new goals once you accomplish your previous goals.

9. Explore New Education/Training Opportunities

It's somewhat of a cliché, but information really does lead to power and success. Never pass up chances to learn and grow more as a person and as a worker; part of career planning is going beyond passive acceptance of training opportunities to finding new ones that will help enhance or further your career.

Take the time to contemplate what types of educational experiences will help you achieve your career goals. Look within your company, your professional association, your local universities and community colleges, as well as online distance learning programs, to find potential career-enhancing opportunities – and then find a way to achieve them.

10. Research Further Career/Job Advancement Opportunities

One of the really fun outcomes of career planning is picturing yourself in the future. Where will you be in a year? In five years? A key component to developing multiple scenarios of that future is researching career paths.

Of course, if you're in what you consider a dead-end job, this activity becomes even more essential to you, but all job-seekers should take the time to research various career paths – and then develop scenarios for seeing one or more of these visions become reality. Look within your current employer and current career field, but again, as with all aspects of career planning, do not be afraid to look beyond to other possible careers.

Final Thoughts on Career Planning

Don't wait too long between career planning sessions. Career planning can have multiple benefits, from goal-setting to career change, to a more successful life. Once

you begin regularly reviewing and planning your career using the tips provided in this article, you'll find yourself better prepared for whatever lies ahead in your career – and in your life.

Dr. Randall S. Hansen is founder of Quintessential Careers, one of the oldest and most comprehensive career development sites on the Web, as well CEO of EmpoweringSites.com. He is also founder of MyCollegeSuccessStory.com and EnhanceMyVocabulary.com. He is publisher of Quintessential Careers Press, including the Quintessential Careers electronic newsletter, QuintZine. Dr. Hansen is also a published author, with several books, chapters in books, and hundreds of articles. He's often quoted in the media and conducts empowering workshops around the country. Finally, Dr. Hansen is also an educator, having taught at the college level for more than 15 years. Visit his personal Website or reach him by email at randall(at)quintcareers.com.