

Developing a Career Strategy

"The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them."

– George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright

Creating Your Ideal Career

Meet Jack; a talented professional who's been with his organization for several years. Although Jack's good at his job, he's never given much thought to what he'd like to achieve with his career.

And, because he hasn't taken the time to define his dreams, or to come up with a strategy to realize them, he frequently misses key opportunities. If he'd taken advantage of these, he would have been promoted several times over the years.

Jack's actually still in the same role he was originally hired for. He's moderately happy on the surface, but he knows that, deep down, he could be achieving much more.

Does this sound like a career you'd like to have?

Chances are, you want to work in a role that's fun, challenging and fulfilling; and that also pushes you to achieve your full potential. The good news is that there may be plenty of opportunities available to you in your current role. All you need to do is identify them, and create a strategy to get to where you want to go.

In this article, we'll outline a common-sense approach that you can use to think about how to reach your full potential in your career.

Taking Control of Your Career

Some people think that the development of their career is out of their hands. After all, you can't get a job, promotion, or project without someone else giving it to you, right?

Well, on one level, that's true. However, what you do and how far you go in life is in reality up to one person: you. Great careers don't just happen – if you want a career that excites and challenges you, then you need to plan for it.

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These steps will help you do this:

Step 1: Review Your Strengths, Weaknesses, Motivators, and Values

Developing a career strategy is like constructing a building. You have to start with a solid foundation and, bit by bit, work your way towards the top.

Before you do anything else, you need to analyze your strengths and weaknesses, as well as understanding your values and what motivates you.

So, start by looking at your strengths and weaknesses. What do you excel at in the role you're in now? And, what skills have allowed you to shine in previous roles? Conversely, what are your weakest skills, or the tasks you find most difficult?

Remember, strengths and weaknesses aren't always obvious. For instance, you might be great at creating harmony in a group; you might be very good at winning others over to your side; or, you might have a talent for inspiring people to go along with a new initiative. These are all strengths!

Next, analyze what motivates you in your career:

- What tasks, projects, or roles get you excited, right now?
- What type of role would you be motivated to work towards in the future?
- What interests you about your current position, your colleagues, and your organization?
- Which responsibilities would you enjoy that you don't already have?

Last, identify your values. This is important because you can use these as a map to guide your decisions. Your career strategy should be directed by your values just as much as by your dreams. Focus on identifying your top five values.

Step 2: Know Your Comparative Advantage

Once you have a good idea of your strengths and motivators, you need to identify your comparative advantage. This is something that you can do uniquely well, compared with the people around you; a strength, skill set, or quality unique to you that will add value to your organization.

It's important to know your comparative advantage because using this trait or skill will help you succeed in your career. Remember, your comparative advantage

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isn't always what you do best; it's something you're better at than anyone else, and that fills a niche in your company.

If you're struggling to discover your own comparative advantage, think back to the last few performance reviews you've had. Has your boss praised or commended you for particular skills, traits, or successes on a consistent basis? If so, this might offer some clues as to your comparative advantage.

You can also look back at the strengths you identified in step 1, and ask colleagues, clients, or even friends for their input.

Step 3: Research Possibilities and Make the Most of Opportunities

Whether you can see them right away or not, there may be many opportunities for growth and advancement in your organization, and in your current industry. But it's up to you to identify and make the most of these opportunities.

Analyze the political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological trends that might affect your career as you move forward. Using this, you can identify likely areas of growth and opportunity, as well as areas to avoid.

You can also revisit the review of your strengths that you did in step 1 – what opportunities might be available to you that come from your strengths?

Make sure that you stay up-to-date with what your organization can offer you, and be certain to take advantage of any training or development courses. For example, does your company provide tuition reimbursement for relevant studies? Or, are there any upcoming trade shows or conferences that you would benefit from attending?

The people around you can also help you identify opportunities. For instance, an experienced mentor can help you enormously in your career, especially when he or she is someone that you trust and respect.

Step 4: Develop Expertise

By now, you should be starting to create an image in your mind that revolves around what you're good at, what you're interested in, what motivates you, and the opportunities you have available.

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Now you need to develop the expertise needed for the next step forward. To build expertise, identify the knowledge, skills, certifications, or degrees you'll need to reach the role you'd most like to have. (This is closely tied in with the previous step, since there may be plenty of opportunities to develop expertise within your own organization or industry.)

Tip:

Don't rely on luck, or on people "taking a chance on you." Make sure that you have the training and qualifications needed to take advantage of your opportunities.

Step 5: Network

Professional networking is an important aspect of creating a career strategy. After all, people can only help you if they know about you, which is why you need to get to know the people who can help you achieve your goals.

Remember, you can network with colleagues in different departments, as well as suppliers and professionals in other organizations or industries. You can also network using tools such as Twitter and LinkedIn.

So, plan the networking needed to do to take advantage of your opportunities, and keep in mind that networking works both ways: you'll get the biggest benefit if you try to help others too.

Step 6: Analyze Current Options

Once you have thought about the "big picture," have started building expertise and have planned your networking, it's time to look at the short term, tactical options available to you right now:

- Is there an upcoming project that would allow you to showcase your comparative advantage, so that you can shine in front of people who matter?
- Is someone in your department vacating their position, or taking a leave of absence? If so, could you volunteer to take his or her place?
- Is there a challenging task that you could do to use your skills in a new way?

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- Is there any way that you could craft your job to get the experience you want?

See if you can come up with a list of options that will start you moving in the right direction.

Step 7: Pull It All Together

By this stage, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What are my biggest strengths?
- What are my biggest weaknesses?
- What really motivates me at work? What do I do that makes me truly happy?
- What are my top five values?
- What's my comparative advantage? What makes me unique in my organization?
- What knowledge, skills or qualifications do I need to acquire in order to move forward and excel?
- Which of my colleagues/bosses/suppliers is in a position to help me advance?
- What options are available to me right now that could allow me either to use my skills in a new way, or to really stand out from the crowd?

Take some time to analyze what this information says about you, and what you want from your career. Then use this information to take the next step, and move forward.

Step 8: Move Forward

Now that you've identified what you want out of your career, and have answered some key questions about what's important to you, it's time to start setting the personal career goals that will help you move forward.

It's important to set both short-term and long-term goals. Short-term goals are goals you can accomplish within the next few weeks or months. Long-term goals should be achievable in the next few years.

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