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What to consider when setting career goals

While the everyday tasks at your job obviously need to get done, it's also just as important to have long-term career goals—whether it's because you are looking to eventually move up the corporate ladder or just for your own mental health and well-being. We all want to have the sense that we are moving forward in life, and a big part of that usually includes our careers. So, what kind of process should you consider when thinking about the next five years or so of your career trajectory?

Many people subscribe to the "S.M.A.R.T." goals idea: Focusing on a (S)pecific, (M)easurable, (A)ttainable, (R)elevant, and (T)ime-bound plan in order to get to where you want to go in your career. While this is certainly a great foundation from which to jump off, a little more digging into what you want and how to get there can go a long way.

Identify your options

You will never get anywhere if you don't know where you can go. Make a list of possible career options, taking into consideration

the position you hold now, as well as your degrees, skill sets, values and interests. Those are a lot of factors to consider, so once you make up a list you're comfortable with, make sure to thoroughly research the careers that make the cut—not just by searching online, but also by speaking with those who currently hold the position you want in the industry you want. Whether it's an entirely new position than what you hold now (or even an entirely new industry), hearing from those who do what you think you might want to do can be extremely helpful in narrowing down your career trajectory.

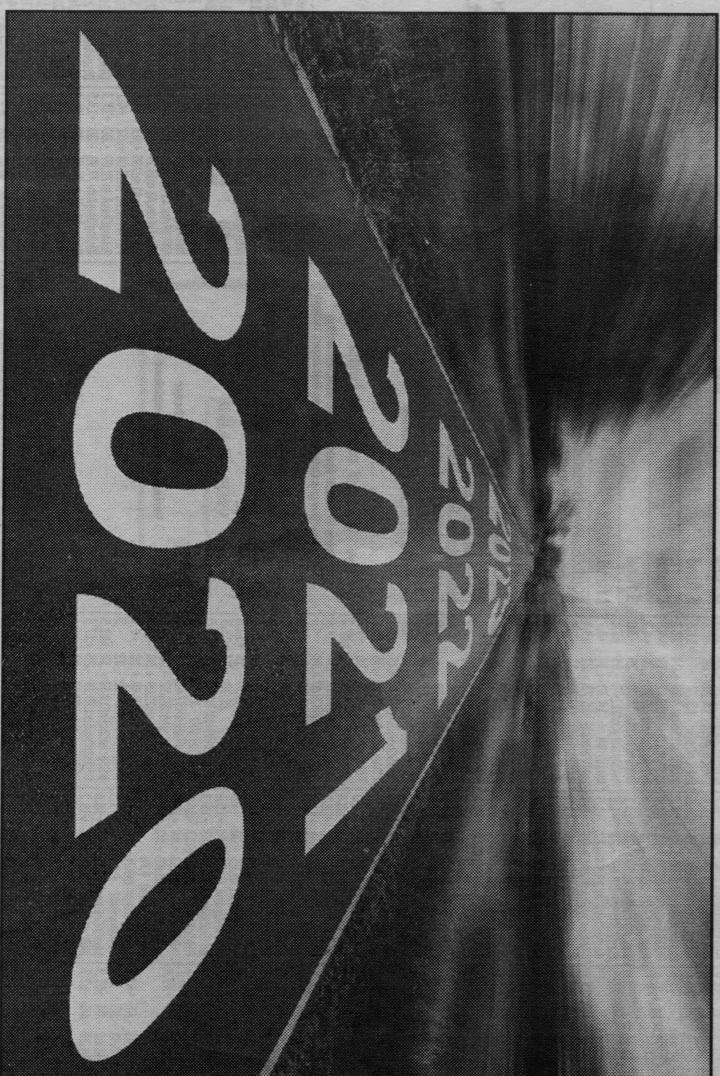
Make it measurable

Break down the ways in which you can achieve what you have decided you want to achieve, and make sure it's realistic. Having small, measurable benchmarks along the way can help you stay motivated. Inc. Magazine suggests that your career roadmap "should be a challenge, not a cakewalk. If your goals do not make you at least a little bit uncomfortable, set your sights higher. Push yourself in your overall vision and in the tasks that will carry you there."

One of the most important things to consider when creating long-term career goals is separating the pie-in-the-sky dreams from the realistic ones. That doesn't mean you can't draw up a plan to get yourself to a job or career you've always wanted—it simply means that now is the time to really come face to face with the reality of how (or yes, if) it can really happen.

Write down your plan

Now that you have an idea of what you want to do and where you want to be five years from now, it's time to develop an actionable strategy. In other words, it's decision time. Forbes



advises making a pros and cons list, evaluating how each of your possible paths aligns with achieving your goals and values, and seriously considering the future consequences of each possible path. What are deal breakers for you? Do you want or need more experience in your field before you make your move? Are you willing to relocate from your current location? What kind of impact would your possible career path have on your family? Once you have considered all the options, you can move forward with a clear sense of what you want to do and how to get there.

Whether you've decided that you want to completely change industries, turn your job into a career, or simply make the career you have now more lucrative for the future, it's important for any professional to have a five-year (or even ten- or fifteen-year) plan written down that you can review and revise if needed. While no one knows exactly where they will be down the line, it's never a bad idea to have an idea of where you want to go.

This special advertising section was prepared by independent writer Andrea Moran. The production of this section did not involve the news or editorial staff of The Washington Post.