

# Master Plan: Why Professional Development Plans Make a Difference

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*Professional development plans help you chart your professional course, then help you steer there. Keep them simple and revisit them regularly.*

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We remember being told a long time ago that for a sailboat that has no port in mind, there is no such thing as a fair wind.

If you don't have a destination for your boat, or your career, you'll never know quite where you are or how to reach the next leg of the trip. A professional development plan is just that—a plan you devise to help you achieve the next opportunities in your career. In essence, it's a map that guides you on your professional journey. It can also ensure you are proficient in your current position.

## Where Are You?

Some of us are “accidental tourists” in our careers, always seeming to slip into the right job at the right time. But the majority of us need to be more structured in our approach to managing our careers.

The day we land our first HIM job, we aren't thinking, “What's next?” Instead, as we become proficient in our current roles, most of us have a desire to grow professionally and take on more interesting challenges. Therefore, reflecting on our next professional level and how we will move there is an important first step in developing a professional development plan.

Plans should have both short and long-term components. A short-term plan might be one to five years in the future, and long-term more than five years. You should review your plan at least once a year to keep it and you on target

There is no one template to offer. Your plan will be unique because it's about you, a unique individual. However, there are components to a plan that are pretty standard and make sense for most people.

Start on a basic plan by answering some questions, setting some timeframes, and sharing your plan with your boss, your human resources department, or both. Sample questions are shown below in “Three Questions to Start Your Plan”. Your answers shouldn't exceed a couple of pages.

### Three Questions to Start Your Plan

Start your development plan by assessing where you are now, where you want to be in the coming years, and what you need to do to get there. Answer the following questions.

#### 1. Where am I in my career right now?

Ask yourself:

- How satisfied am I with where I am in my career now? What do I like and dislike? What am I good at and not so good at?
- Does this organization see my strengths and weaknesses the same way I do?
- If it doesn't, do I need more feedback or training to ensure my self-perceptions match those of management and decision makers? (Being really effective in your current job is the most expedient launching pad for moving to the next level.)

**2. What do I want to be doing in 1–2 years, 3–5 years, and beyond 5 years?**

Ask yourself:

- What do I want to be doing at the end of each of these timeframes? Consider any personal and professional plans you have. If you really want to “see the world and travel every opportunity I get,” then factor that in to your answer (e.g., don’t pursue a position that requires a lot of additional hours in the evening or on weekends, or do pursue a job that requires lots of travel).
- What skills or experience are required for these positions or functional areas? You may not know the answer to this question—check with human resources or ask your boss or mentor to help you find out.
- How are these jobs or functions changing? What are current or possible future technology changes in these areas, and how will they affect the skills and experience required?

**3. What’s the gap between where I am and where I want to be?**

Ask yourself:

- How do I like to work, independently or as a team member? Do I like to manage people? Do these answers match up with or complement my career goals?
- What additional education do I need to become a candidate for my short-term and long-term goals? Am I willing to return to school to obtain the necessary qualifications?
- What skills do I need to develop, and over what timeframe do I need to develop them? Compare your current skills and experience to what is desired at each level along your career path. Look for the gaps. Ask: What is the best way to acquire these skills? On the job, through training, with special assignments? Am I willing to relocate if necessary in order to gain specific experience?

**Discuss It, Review It, Renew It**

Now that you’ve answered the questions and come up with a basic plan, you need to seek some feedback. Review your plan with a mentor or a human resources development specialist, if available. Consider how your plan might affect those close to you and discuss it with them. Seek their feedback and be prepared to listen to their advice. This is no time to be defensive. Consider how you can still achieve your goals if they have concerns. There is always more than one way to achieve something.

Once you have established your plan, discuss its contents with your boss and agree upon its viability. Be willing to adjust your plan based on your boss’s feedback. Remember: your plan is an evolving creation, just like your life. It should be revisited periodically, amended, adjusted, and tweaked-but not filed. Keep it with your calendar and enter an appointment with yourself to review it.

Meanwhile, be active in pursuing the right education, training, or assignment opportunities that help you take small steps in the right direction. And keep reviewing your plan. Things can change. Along the course of your career you may discover an area of work that really excites you, even though it wasn’t part of your original plan. The environment around you may change, too. Organizations are always evolving, losing and creating different organizational structures and positions within themselves. Technology changes are rapidly escalating, and the skills required tomorrow may be very different from those required today.

And finally, keep it simple. You’ve heard many stories about how hard it is to stick to a diet or exercise plan. Why? Because we go from feast to famine; from no exercise to exhausting ourselves.

Just take a small step and do simple things first. For example, arrange to have a cup of coffee with a trusted, experienced HIM professional and ask for her or his perspectives on your career path. Or if you know you need more education, register for one class. Once you’ve gotten into the swing of working and going to school, you’ll be better equipped to decide if you can take two classes at a time. Your motivation and confidence will build as you achieve.

**Helping Others Plan**

A note for managers and supervisors: you can use this same process in the role of a coach to help others form professional development plans. Share your own plan with a staff member so he or she can see what a plan looks like.

A word of caution, however. Don't offer advice if you don't have the knowledge or experience. Only share what you know and offer to help find out what neither of you know. Finally, as a coach, your ability to help someone be realistic about plans without clipping wings too much will be important.

## A Template for Success

**Date professional development plan written/revised:**

**Current position:**

**Desired position, role, or function:**

- 5 years from now:
  - Skills and experience I have that match the requirements for this role:
  - Skills and experience I must acquire to meet the requirements for this role:
- 5–10 years from now:
  - Skills and experience I have that match the requirements for this role:
  - Skills and experience I must acquire to meet the requirements for this role:

**Plan for acquiring additional skills/experience:**

- Year 1:
- Year 2:
- Year 3:
- Year 4:
- Years 5–7:
- Years 7–10:

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