



# The 21st Century Professional

BY MARIE R. HERMAN CPS/CAP

## Strategies for taking your career to the next level

**A**re you satisfied with your career? Have you progressed as far as you thought you would at this point in your life? Are you ready to move up but not sure how to do it? Developing a plan for your career journey can help you achieve your goals.

To set off on your career journey, you must start by recognizing what is appealing to you about your current and former positions, identifying the skills required in the position you desire, evaluating how your presentation skills measure up, and creating an action plan for success (including networking tips).

### Identify Where You Are

Start by evaluating your present and past jobs. Ask yourself pertinent questions

about what you like and dislike. As you review your current position, be careful to avoid the “grass is greener” syndrome. Don’t end up exchanging one set of problems for another because you didn’t carefully think through what is actually making you dissatisfied.

**Duties:** If you hate being a waitress, then the restaurant you work for is irrelevant. Is paperwork a challenge you relish or a task you dread? Do routines comfort or bore you? How organized are you?

**Money:** Evaluate all the benefits and make sure it is an apples-to-apples comparison when considering a job change. Will you be eating out at lunch more often? Will you have to wear business clothes rather than casual? Are you paying for a larger portion of your health insurance? Do you still have vision or

dental insurance? Are you giving up accumulated vacation time? Do you receive sick days, personal days, etc.?

**Commute:** An additional two-hour round-trip commute equals a 25 percent pay cut in your hourly rate for a typical 40-hour work week. Don’t forget to factor in parking, gasoline, and public transportation costs.

**Coworkers:** If you love your job but dislike a coworker, you might be able to outlast them on the job. On the other hand, wonderful coworkers can sometimes offset dull work.

**Management Style:** What qualities do you like or dislike in your boss? Do you appreciate regular feedback or do you feel micro-managed? Do you feel like your opinions are respected? Interviews are a two-way process: You can evaluate

your new manager's style while your manager is evaluating your corporate fit.

**Client Interaction:** Does it thrill or chill you to work with clients?

**Company Size:** Small companies may give you the opportunity to wear a lot of hats, but they may also limit your ability to rise above a certain rank. Large companies may have money for training, but there are no budget guarantees when the economy is poor. Don't prejudge what a company can offer based solely on its size.

**Opportunities for Advancement:** It may be worthwhile to make a lateral move if it will provide future advancement opportunities. Sometimes the best path to career success is not a straight line.

**Counter-offer:** After you have evaluated all these factors, you will recognize what is making you unhappy. While a counter-offer is flattering, money is rarely the only reason for leaving. If the current or new workplace will not be changing the factors making you unhappy, you are only applying a temporary bandage to a long-term problem. It won't take long for dissatisfaction to return.

Separate what you do well from what you love. Just because you excel at a certain task doesn't mean you want to do it every day.

Answering these questions will help you to envision your ideal job. If you love paperwork and routine, accounting and finance may be the department for you. If you prefer customer interaction, you might look toward customer service, sales, or marketing. If technology excites you, then the IT department is where you might want to land.

## Identify Where You Want To Be

As you envision your career journey, don't just consider your dream job. Think about what kind of person you want to be and how you want to spend your time. Incorporate your ideals into your dream job, if at all possible. Do you want to be a subject-matter expert, a published author, work with children, or something else? By giving some thought to your passions, you may actually decide upon a job that melds the best of your personal and professional worlds.

You can identify the skills required for the job you want by doing research. Ask

for copies of job descriptions from the same level position at different companies. Observe the individuals that are successful at that level. Interview human resource personnel. Review the job ads to learn what companies are seeking. Look at the Department of Labor Occupational Outlook Handbook (<http://stats.bls.gov/ocolhome.htm>).

Arming yourself with high-level skills and knowledge will increase the likelihood of being considered for a promotion.

## Evaluate How Your Present Skills Stack Up

Examples of the various skills and traits you may need to acquire or develop include:

### Technical Skills

- Computer Equipment*
- Keying*
- Organization*
- Meeting Planning*

### Soft Skills

- Education*
- Customer Service*
- Phone Etiquette*
- Communication*
- Sales / Networking*

### Professional Traits

- Appearance*
- Confidence*
- Protocol*
- Poise*
- Confidentiality*

Taking the time to accurately inventory your skills and personality traits will give you a realistic sense of the areas you need to improve to enable a rise to the next step on the career ladder.

DaNika Robinson CPS, with the Virginia Commonwealth University Massey Cancer Center in Richmond, updates her résumé when her skill levels change. "If I take on a new task at work or within IAAP, I update my résumé," says Robinson. "I want to always be prepared if someone asks for it or if I am in the market for a new job. We tend to forget things over a period of time and when we are in a crunch to update our résumé, we may

leave some very important things out."

Physical skills are easily tested (your keyboard speed, your ability to file accurately, your knowledge of various computer programs, reading comprehension, and spelling). To prove your skills, you may wish to pursue appropriate certifications (such as Microsoft Office Specialist or Certified Administrative Professional).

It is often more challenging to quantify intangible qualities. Do you portray confidence, poise, attentiveness, competence, and leadership? We view ourselves through the filter of our own self-esteem and therefore we may over- or underestimate our personal qualities and appeal. In the same manner, our actions and words are viewed through the filter of the recipient or observer. As a result, the same action could be interpreted as good followup or as nagging, depending on who was asked.

How do you gain intangible skills? Experience helps because you will learn from your successes and failures. Observe how others react to your actions and to you during conversations. Pay particular attention to their body language and facial expressions. Ask a trusted friend or coworker for honest feedback about things you do well or need to improve. Be aware that you may have to face an unpleasant truth about yourself in order to grow.

Review your past performance evaluations. Are certain areas consistently noted for improvement? That should raise a red flag.

## Create an Action Plan for Skills Development

Once you have a good understanding of the areas you need to improve, you can create an action plan to address them. Making a conscious change requires effort and discipline. Ensure that appropriate people are aware of your efforts and more importantly, your progress and improvement. Establish SMART goals for yourself:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Aligned (with personal and corporate goals)
- Realistic
- Time-driven

Using SMART goals will allow you to measure your progress. Ask for periodic feedback from your boss. At a minimum, you may receive credit for trying to improve.

LaTonya Blount CPS/CAP, with Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, emphasizes the importance of setting goals. "For me, goals are like a business plan—their purpose is to keep you on track and serve as measurable guidelines. If you stray from the goals you set, then you could possibly derail your career. If a person does not have goals, then there is no way to determine if you are on the right rung on the ladder to success."

Attend seminars to gain knowledge and stay current in your field. Read pertinent books and professional journals. Join a professional association. Actively seek opportunities to gain new skills (by holding offices, serving on committees, organizing special events, etc.). Do a regular self-assessment by reviewing your skills, and measuring and tracking your success in achieving your goals. Take a long hard look at your flaws. What do you admire in other people? How can you add those qualities to your repertoire? What do you need to do less frequently?

Look at your boss's needs. Take classes beyond your own job and expertise to develop a greater understanding of the company's needs. Learn financing, accounting, litigation, business development, marketing, or proposal writing, for example. Understanding corporate goals and initiatives will benefit you and the company. Being able to converse intelligently with management will set you apart from the masses. This is not to say you need a thorough understanding of all subjects or that you must be able to do another's job. It merely means you have a general understanding of all areas pertaining to the company.

Chrissy Blackwell CPS/CAP, with the Tuscarawas County Convention & Visitors' Bureau in New Philadelphia, Ohio, recognizes how critical it is to update her skills. "I went back to school to take more business classes. I was required to only take a basic business class the first time around, but I wanted to learn more about the management side of business."

Look for ways to become more visible

at work. Volunteer to be on an important committee. Ask to assist in planning an annual event. Look at management priorities and initiatives. Can you suggest some fresh new ways to implement management objectives?

Do you wait for others to give you work or do you actively seek out new areas where you can contribute?

Patience is required. Sometimes we are so anxious to make changes that we don't first research why a particular decision was made or a process implemented. There may be factors you are not aware of or that you may not recognize for their level of importance. Particularly if you are new on a job, your enthusiasm can create ill will with your coworkers. Change often inherently implies that someone else was incompetent or not doing the job as effectively as possible.

### Document Your Newfound Skills

A résumé concentrates your entire professional history into one or two pages. More than likely, you had to drop entire jobs and skill sets in order to keep the short length. A Curriculum Vitae (CV) on the other hand can be expanded to unlimited lengths.

Maintaining both a CV and résumé keeps your history at your fingertips. You can recall at a moment's notice any project you have worked on. The CV should include education, training, skills, talents, jobs, publications, awards, certificates, etc. This helps you in multiple ways: arms you for interviews (stories are fresh in your mind); prepares you for your performance review; improves your self-confidence; records your accomplishments; and encourages you to customize your résumé for each job application.

With your documentation up to date, you're ready to take the next step in your search for a better career.

### Use Networking to Learn About Other Jobs

Networking has several purposes:

1. To interact with those who are already where you want to be;
2. To expand your knowledge base (learning about qualities needed); and
3. To make others aware of you.

## GOAL-SETTING QUESTIONS

- What kind of person would I like to become?
- What character traits would I like to develop?
- What would I like to accomplish over the next few years?
- Which existing skills am I proud of?
- Which skills would I like to develop or master?
- Who can help me achieve my goals?
- In which environment do I work best?
- How do I interact with others?
- What are my professional strengths?
- What is most important to me in terms of work-life balance?
- How important is money when I look for a job?
- How much do I want to earn (realistically) per month?
- How much do I need to save per month?

### AREAS TO EVALUATE:

#### Technical

- What are my strengths?
- What areas would I like to develop?

#### Soft Skills

- What are my strengths?
- What areas would I like to develop?

#### Professional Qualities / Personality Traits

- What are my strengths?
- What areas would I like to develop?

#### Goal # \_\_\_\_\_

- How will I benefit?
- Skills I need to develop
- Obstacles I need to overcome
- Who can help me achieve this goal and how?
- Date to achieve?

#### Review date \_\_\_\_\_

Networking can happen anywhere—at your church, your volunteer projects, a chamber of commerce breakfast, a singles mixer. You need to be open when talking to people and allow a relationship to develop to a level of trust and a desire to assist each other.

So where do you start? One of the easiest ways is to join a professional organization. But this method only works if you are attending meetings or getting involved with committees or events. Without some level of commitment and effort on your part, you will not benefit from the available networking or build any lasting relationships within the organization.

Networking is not about taking advantage of other people or only calling on people when you need something. True networking is the process of building a relationship with an individual, learning about mutual needs, and then exploring ways of working together to help each other. Everyone involved ben-

efits. It should not be a quick fix or a “what can I get out of it” relationship. It should be thinking always of how you can help other people to solve their problems. In the process, people begin to think of how they can help you solve your problems as well.

### Perform Continuous Skills Assessment

As your strategic career plan evolves, it is critical that you regularly evaluate all your professional development efforts. You must develop new skills while maintaining current proficiencies.

You should be regularly updating your résumé and CV (quarterly is recommended). Have you attended any classes, learned any new software, had any professional organization involvement, etc.? If you don't have anything to add to your résumé after three to six months, it should be a red flag that you are not developing yourself.

Just “doing your job” is what your

salary is for. Raises, bonuses, and promotions usually result from going above and beyond. Following the steps in this article will ensure that you are not only developing yourself professionally, but that you are tracking your efforts as well.

By setting goals and creating an action plan, you will take your first steps toward making your dreams become reality.

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