

Planning for the Future: Steps for Career Advancement



Choosing to Choose

Some people knew what they wanted to be when they grew

up right from the very beginning and followed that career path throughout their life. For most of us, on the other hand, answering that question is not as easy.

There are many choices to consider when selecting a career path. A good starting point might be to ask yourself some questions.

- What am I interested in?
- What am I good at?
- What am I passionate about?
- What does it mean to be successful?

Work takes up about half of our waking lives, and, for better or worse, our jobs give us a social identity. Good career planning means being able to look with clear sight at your current situation and being able to envision your career in the future.

That career future is your choice and you have the ultimate freedom to make decisions about your potential career path based on your passions, interests and your skill set. In other words, you can choose to choose. Of course, there are seemingly innumerable hard limitations of circumstance that make up the field of our possible actions, but the more we feel like we are agents in our lives and agents of our futures, the more happiness we will have.

You may be already established on a career path, considering a new career, or just starting out. This guide is intended to give practical ideas that will be meaningful in each of these cases.





Evaluating Your Career Path

In evaluating your career path, you might want to think in terms of the long-term and the short. Your long-range vision, what you're shooting *for*, isn't necessarily what you're shooting at today. Let your long-range thinking be shaped by as much *self-knowledge* as you have available.

For many, having a job with a purpose or mission matters more than making a lot of money. This can happen at the beginning of your career, or it can change over time. Usually, when that happens, the change is a good one that results in a more rewarding possibility.

Every career path has twists, turns and forks in the road. You might have come out of law school planning to be a high-powered corporate attorney who will retire at fifty and travel the world. Then, in your thirties, you found that you derive purpose from helping the poor and the disadvantaged. Do you take the leap and the pay-cut and go to work for the nonprofit now?

Many women and sometimes men choose to modify their career course dramatically by taking time off to raise their children or to follow other dreams. These are hard choices, with salary implications for years to come. But, with deep personal reflection on what matters most and what path will bring about the most personal satisfaction and happiness, making the hard choice can ultimately be the right one.

Career and Personality Tests

If you are re-evaluating your current job trajectory or thinking about a new career, there are a variety of career suitability and personality tests available for you to take, either online or from career counseling services and career coaches. Even if you think you don't need these tools, they can't hurt. The Myers-Briggs Personality Test, in particular, has had a good run in a number of settings, including online dating as well as human resources.

Often, however, we rely on tests like these to be external validators for things that we already know. "Look! I'm an introvert! This quiz says so." Certainly these tools can be helpful when you are mulling over ideas, but ultimately the surest route to self-knowledge isn't to ask around!



Once you've done the deep thinking part, the rest is mere technique. It goes without saying that you need to understand the *ladder* in your chosen field. In the nursing field, for instance, a candidate might begin their career as a Certified Nurse Assistant, move on to become a Licensed Practical Nurse, and ultimately reach the level of Registered Nurse. Climbing the ladder might involve a series of accreditations, developing skills and earning promotions, or other means of adding job responsibility. These things vary by field, but the ladder can be your initial structuring tool for planning advancement in your career.

There has been a push towards younger and younger accomplishment in the last decade or so. Think of high school students founding nonprofits as one example. As a result of this trend, many professional programs have skewed younger and younger. Imagine the whiz kid who finishes a PhD in clinical psychology and obtains

a professional license to practice at the age of twenty-five. He's done everything right – no, he's done everything more right, better than his peers – but he can't find clients to support a private practice because, of course, he's only twenty-five years old. It happens.

Thus, it is important to be realistic and have a realistic plan for advancement. This can be difficult for some if they are accustomed to easy advancement or believe that workplace trends in one industry, like the youth and disruption favored in information technology, are the trends everywhere.

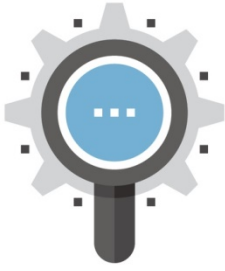
They are not, and most fields and industries have long-established and regimented pathways for advancement. Being a "go-getter" shows your bosses that you want to move up the ladder, but a balance should be struck, and, often, a line maintained.

Lessons from the Legacy Project

The Legacy Project was founded in 2004 by Karl Pillemer, a professor of human development at Cornell University. The project is simple in design but profound in its implications. He sent out a survey to collect responses from Americans over the age of seventy, hoping to discover their collective wisdom. The one question he asked them is this: "What are the most important lessons you have learned over the course of your life?" When it came to the matter of careers, the almost unanimous reply was, "Try to be involved in what you love for your work." Of the one thousand people that Dr. Pillemer interviewed, not one of them said, "Try to make a lot of money in order to fund doing what you really love when you're not at work."

You can learn more about the Legacy Project at <http://legacyproject.human.cornell.edu/>.





Where to Look for Jobs

Experts say that if you are job hunting your first step should be

telling your network that you are looking. Let your friends, family members, current and former coworkers, classmates, and your social network know that you are job hunting. You'd be surprised how many connections you might make just by spreading the word.

Sometimes, getting introduced to a company through your network can open doors and give you a leg up from other candidates. Ask your network if their company is hiring, or if they have a connection to a company that might be a good fit for you.

Research companies that you think would be a good fit for your career goals. It can't hurt to send your resume to companies that don't have a posted job opening right now. You might catch them just as they were about to post an opening or get ready to expand.



Job Search Engines & Job Boards

There are hundreds of job search engines and job boards online these days. Most sites will allow you to enter specific search criteria, like job type, location and specific keywords to help you narrow your search and quickly find available jobs that match your criteria. Some will even let you fill out a questionnaire and alert you to openings that match your profile.

According to [thebalancecareers.com](https://www.thebalancecareers.com), the ten best¹ are:

1. Indeed.com
2. CareerBuilder.com
3. Dice.com
4. Glassdoor.com
5. Jobs.google.com
6. Idealist.com
7. LinkedIn.com
8. LinkUp.com
9. Monster.com
10. US.jobs

¹ <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/top-best-job-websites-2064080>





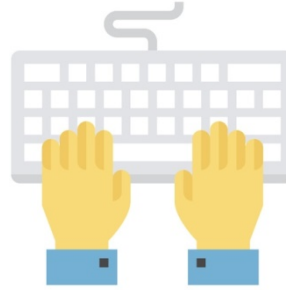
Job Centers

You can also visit your local job center. Staff at these centers will help you search for jobs, find training and answer additional employment related questions. You can find a job center in your area at CareerOneStop.org.



The Library

Your local public library is another source to consult. They will have information on how to find jobs and information on potential careers. They might even offer resume help and classes to build your skill set. Some libraries also offer job seeking assistance and counseling too.



How to Write a Resume That Stand Outs

Employers often review hundreds of resumes and applications for a single job posting. The time that you spend polishing your resume is time well spent.

- **Design is important.** You want your resume to stand apart from others in the pile. A simple, clean and modern design is best. You can download a template online, or use a prebuilt template in your word processing software to get started. Use a font size of 10-12 to make it easy to read.
- **Put the good stuff at the top.** If an employer scans the top of your resume, you want the important information to be there where they can see it quickly. A summary statement that outlines why you are a good choice for the job is important. Keep your contact information at the top of the page brief, so you can devote more space for important achievements.
- **Words Matter.** Take the time to update your resume each time you send it to an employer. Update the



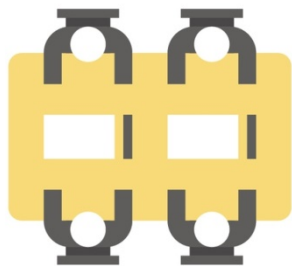
summary statement so that it applies to the job you are applying for. Include key words from the job posting in your resume, if they apply to your previous experience. Some larger employers use a tracking system that scans for keywords and highlights candidates that best match what they're looking for. If those keywords are not in your resume, your application might get skipped.

- **Focus on Skills.** Your resume should showcase the skills you have developed over the course of your career. Put your most advanced skills at the top of the list and work backward.
- **Highlight Your Successes.** Instead of listing your previous job responsibilities, highlight your successes instead. Awards and honors should be noted as well. Include statistics, if you can, like percentage increases in sales or percentage decrease in costs.
- **One or two pages max.** Most resumes should be confined to a single page, or two pages if you have been in your career for more than 10 years. You want to highlight your best accomplishments and abilities, but keep it short so your potential employer can learn

about you without having to scan through a long document.

- **Make sure it looks good on the screen and on paper.** Do a test print to make sure everything prints correctly. Your resume should be readable on multiple screens and on different types of computers. Sending your resume as a PDF file is a good choice.
- **Create a customized cover letter.** When you send your resume, include a cover letter that has been customized for the job you are applying for. The cover letter gives you another opportunity to say why you would be an excellent candidate for their job opening.
- **Take the time to proofread.** There is no room for typos on your resume. Read it carefully for spelling errors and punctuation. Have a family member or friend read it too, and give you their feedback.
- **Use a professional email address.** Some employers will not seriously consider a candidate with a silly or inappropriate email address. A good rule of thumb is to use your name as your email address.
- Above all, **be honest.**





Getting Ready for Your Interview

Here are a few tips from the experts on how to prepare for and conduct a solid job interview:

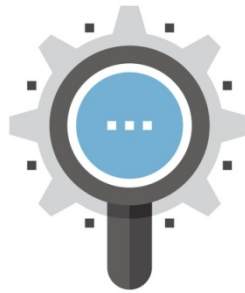
- **Review the job description.** Make a list of qualities or skills that are mentioned in the job posting and take notes on how your experience fits those qualifications.
- **Research the company.** Take a look at the company's website. Read some of its recent press releases. Read some of the company's reviews. Taking the time to research the company will help prepare to answer potential questions. Make a list of any questions you might want to ask the interviewer.
- **Practice.** It can help to practice an in-person interview or a phone interview with a friend or family member beforehand.
- **Your social media can help or hurt you.** According to a recent CareerBuilder survey, "seven in ten employers (70 percent) use social networking sites to research job candidates during hiring process. Nearly half of employers (48 percent) check up on current employees on social media. A third of employers (34 percent) have reprimanded or fired an employee based on content found online."² Consider that a potential employer might review your recent social media posts before inviting you for an interview. Social media can be a good way to highlight recent accomplishments. It can also be a good way to network with professionals in your industry and search for additional job opportunities.
- **Dress accordingly.** First impressions do matter, so business attire is a safe bet. You want to project a professional, well-groomed appearance.
- **What to bring.** Bring extra copies of your resume, your list of prepared questions, a notepad or binder and a pen, along with a printed copy of your business references. If it is appropriate for the position, bring a portfolio of samples of your previous work.

² CareerBuilder. More Than Half of Employers Have Found Content on Social Media That Caused Them NOT to Hire a Candidate, According to Recent CareerBuilder Survey. <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/2377-social-media-hiring.html>



- **What not to bring.** Don't bring your cellphone, or at the very least, turn it off so it does not ring or buzz in your pocket or purse.
- **While you wait,** be professional and courteous to the attendant and all staff you meet. Project confidence in the waiting room.
- **During the interview,** listen carefully and answer the interviewer's questions in a way that highlight your skills and qualifications. This is where your practice sessions can pay off. At the end of the interview, if you are interested in the job, let the interviewer know why you would be an excellent fit.
- **Do you have any questions?** This is a common question during the interview process. It's a good idea to have some questions in mind. It shows that you've done your homework and have come prepared.
- **Don't forget the thank you note!** Collect business cards from everyone you meet with and use this information to follow up. Use the after-interview thank you note to thank the interviewer for their

time, express your interest in the job, and highlight how you would be the best candidate for this position.



Evaluating Potential Employers

You've taken the bull by the horns and decided that it's time to find a new job. Your future employer will spend a lot of time and effort evaluating you. **And you should spend *even more* time and effort evaluating them.** Often, learning about an employer can take a bit of detective work. You find clues, you read the tea leaves. Use the interview to ask questions, of course, but also try to get a sense of your employer's management style and motivation. Is the interviewer trying too hard to sell the company or the position to you? Does he or she seem to be speaking from a script, using slogans, and avoiding the particulars? These can be signs that they might be looking for just another warm body.

Cyber-sleuthing is a natural place to turn. Glassdoor is a website where current and past employees can post anonymous reviews. Remember, though, as with any online review site, that the disgruntled folk are always



apt to write more – and more colorfully – than the rest. You can also turn to apps like Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. For example, if current employees are posting pictures of happy hour at 5 p.m. with the gang from the office, you will have a good idea of both the work hours *and* the level of camaraderie.

Increasingly, people are using tools like Facebook or LinkedIn to strike up conversations with existing employees of a company and asking honest, legitimate questions about the workplace culture. If it seems like nobody is talking, or, worse, they've been instructed not to talk, then that's a clear sign that something is amiss.

Questions to keep in mind when evaluating an employer:

- Will the job allow you to build on your strengths and develop in the direction that you want?
- What is the management style at the company and, especially, in your department or division? Does management seek out input from employees?
- Will you have enough support – staff and time, for example – to accomplish your projects, or does it seem as though there is a pattern of unrealistic expectations and subsequent jams? Some companies, and some individuals, thrive on

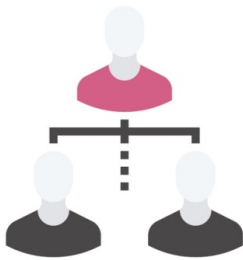
states of emergency and some don't.

- How soon will you be able to contribute in a way that is meaningful to *you* to the company's success? Remember that if the company makes widgets and you really want to make fidgets, then realistically you may never feel in sync with the company's mission.
- What is the turnover rate? A relatively high attrition – say, every two years – isn't necessarily a bad thing if, for example, *your* plan is to learn what you can in about that time and move on. Use your judgment.
- How is the company doing financially? Layoffs in the recent past or planned for the near future is a bad sign. You should also get a sense, if you can, of the company's prospects five or ten years down the road.
- What is the work atmosphere and culture like? Is team building important or do individual employees have their own set of goals?
- Other things to think about are more mundane but no less important. For example, the commute, any travel that might



be expected, or the new city that you might have to move to.

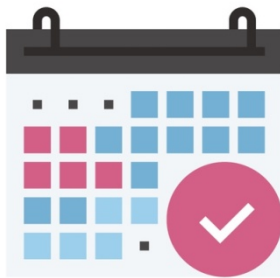
- You should also learn what you can about work hours, which can vary not just from industry to industry but from company to company. Are they acceptable to you?



Advancement: Promotions

Whether you've just started at a new company or you've

been in the same job for years, you should be prepared to put some thought into a realistic assessment of your opportunities for advancement in your job, whether through promotion or getting a raise.



Have a Promotion Plan

Promotions are not inevitable or a matter of course.

Never missing a day of work and being diligent in your assigned tasks – and nothing more – are a reasonably sure way to be passed over. If you are interested in a promotion, you need

to signal as much and, of course, you need to cultivate strategies for getting promoted.

There is more flexibility in work today than in the past; it's not unusual to change jobs more frequently, to make lateral moves, or to work for a while in the "gig" economy, a growing trend where companies hire independent workers for short term jobs. The individual is, in certain ways, like an entrepreneur managing his or her livelihood and marketing his or her skills and talents in the employment marketplace. From this vantage, developing a promotion plan is just a good business strategy for your career.

Here are some tips that many experts agree to be part of a sound promotion plan:

1. **Know what you want.** You can't strategize effectively when you don't have a goal. If you appear to be vying indiscriminately for two or three different positions, you will probably hurt your chances of getting any one of them. Ambition is one thing, but you need to have a direction and demonstrate your commitment to it.
2. **Make your boss an ally.** If you want a promotion internal to your division or department, then you definitely need your boss to support you. There are



innumerable ways to signal your interest, but performance review meetings are an obvious occasion that can be leveraged. Let your boss know that you are interested in higher-level concerns, beyond your day-to-day tasks, and find ways to insinuate that you are capable of tackling them smartly and effectively.

3. **Some degree of self-promotion may be necessary**, but if you demonstrate that you are able to share the glory – put your team-mates' names on the report, take a moment to speak well of your co-workers in meetings – you are demonstrating the kind of ease and magnanimity that mark you out as a good leader.
4. **Take advantage of professional development opportunities.** These may be relevant college courses, or a system of formal continuing education classes unique to your field. Many careers in IT and other technological fields have plentiful opportunities for credentialing, training, and acquiring certificates. But don't neglect, by any means, the less formal opportunities. In Washington DC, for example, there are plenty of "brown bag" lunch events and lunch-

time lecture series for people with jobs in public policy, international relations, and other fields prominently represented in the nation's capital. Find them out, make a habit of going, and your colleagues – and others – will soon be aware of your activities.

5. **Be interested in your field, not just in your job.** Read the industry magazines, learn what other companies are doing, and know what the trends are. There might not be a brown bag event series in your city or region, but you could consider starting one for yourself and other professionals in your field. These occasions are also a good way to network with others in your field or industry.
6. **Act professionally at all times in the workplace.** Be dependable and responsible. Arrive on time. Don't be the one watching the clock at meetings or just before quitting time. Dress and groom professionally. Be a problem-solver. Be a team-player.
7. **Behave and dress in a manner appropriate to the position that you want.** The easier it is to visualize you in that position, the easier it will be for your



boss to promote you or to recommend the promotion.

8. **Don't make yourself indispensable.** This might seem counterintuitive, but if you're the only one who can do your job, why would your boss ever consider moving you to another position? Learn to go out on a limb: groom someone to take your place, and have that person waiting in the wings. One of the reasons that companies often hire from the outside rather than promote from within is that when they promote from within, the internal shuffle caused is disruptive. Try to make it easier for the company to promote you.

9. **Insert yourself.** The classic movie, *All About Eve* is about Eve Harrington, a shy, sweet ingénue who just "happens" to fall into the circle of a great theater actress and then just "happens" to have memorized all of the lines to the leading role when that great actress falls ill. You don't want to be schemer like Eve Harrington. But there might be an opportunity to insert yourself in good faith, if you pay attention. Offer to help your boss with a project that he or she is working on. You might just earn

yourself a place at the table in some meetings you wouldn't otherwise have been invited to.

10. **Find new opportunities.** If your company hired you to sell office equipment like the rest of the sales division, suggest that you could develop new business for them selling office furniture. Write a proposal; ask for a meeting. In the best-case scenario, this could turn into a new position in the company or even a new division – one that you created. It's true! No matter what industry you're working in, this kind of creative thinking and initiative will be valued.



Asking for a Raise

Annual salary increases are the norm, and you might also get regular or occasional bonuses or profit-sharing checks. But if you want a bump in salary outside of those mechanisms, you'll have to ask for it.

Asking for a raise can be one of the most dreaded and awkward things that you will ever do in your career. But it doesn't have to be. Go in clear-eyed, and don't let it get personal. Think that you are, in a real sense, not



just an employee but an entrepreneur tending *your* business. And just as you would never set out on a new business venture without a good business plan, you shouldn't set about asking for a raise without a serious plan, either.

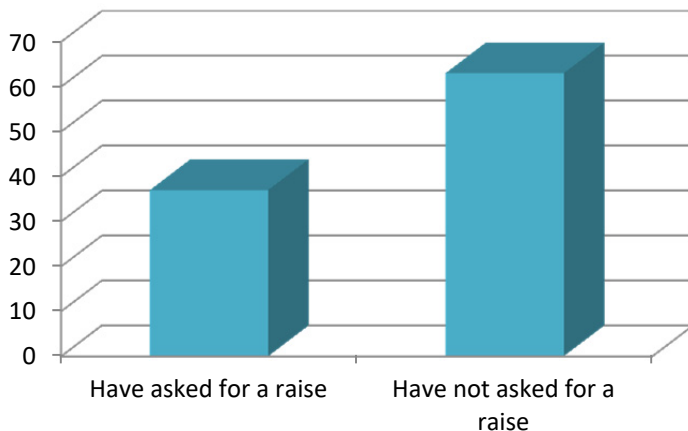
First, you should understand the mechanisms for salary increases in your company. If it's standard to offer increases regularly, once a year, and tied to a performance review, then it isn't likely that you'll be successful trying to negotiate a raise outside of that mechanism. If this is the case, be sure to use those mechanisms to your advantage.

If, on the other hand, you think that there might be more fluidity with regards to timing, think carefully about your approach. Maybe you just wrapped up an important project – with a bow on top – and now you're

lined up for another; maybe you just accrued an honor in your field or spoke at your town's high school or at a professional association convention. Those are ticks in the "good timing" column.

If there are any signs of belt-tightening in your company or if your boss is under the gun this quarter about the department's budget, then obviously you should hold back. To be even more fine-grained, you should time the conversation carefully, too. Is your boss frazzled this week, sleeping on the office sofa? Be smart.

The process can vary significantly from field to field. Be aware that in most corporate environments, unless you work directly under the owner or CEO, your boss or manager will have to get approval from his or her boss, and you'll need to supply him or her with the ammunition needed to make



■ Only 37% of workers surveyed have asked for a raise from their current employer.

Data from PayScale
(<https://www.payscale.com/data/how-to-ask-for-a-raise>)

