Even from an early stage in your career, it is useful to have thought about your career plan. Having a clear idea about the direction you want to head will help you to think about the skills, knowledge and experience you are gaining in your current role, and how these can contribute towards your future career.

You will learn about the importance of being self-aware of both your skills and your areas for improvement. Identifying weaknesses is the first step in addressing them and developing the skills you need for your chosen career path.
1 Your career development plan

A career development plan sets out your medium- and long-term career objectives. It is a working document in that you should regularly reassess your objectives based on your experiences and your developing interests and priorities.

For a career development plan to be effective and constructive, you need to focus on establishing a clear career strategy. For example, you might know your ultimate aim, but without identifying the steps leading up to this, your plan will not be helpful or practical.

Ali currently works as an account executive in a PR agency specialising in sports brand management. He takes a lead in implementing PR campaigns, arranging launches, raising brands’ profile through contact with journalists, bloggers and key influencers within the sector. He also deputises for the account manager at times.

He started working as a junior account executive three years ago, and was promoted to account executive one year ago. Ali loves his job, but is ambitious – ultimately he wants to run his own PR consultancy. However, he knows that he is not yet in a position to launch into this new initiative.

His career plan involves gaining as much good experience as possible and building a network of contacts in the industry over the next few years. He has decided that his next step is to gain experience as an account manager so that he has deeper involvement in managing client relationships and leading pitches for business. These are skills that will serve him well in setting up a consultancy.

Self-employment only became something of interest to Ali relatively recently. On starting his first role in PR, he wanted to work towards ultimately becoming an account manager. However, he has updated and adjusted his plan based on the opportunities available to him and his own interests.

Building a practical strategy

To develop a clear and practical strategy, you need to do the following.

- **Have realistic expectations:** career progression takes time and effort. While it might be reasonable to expect a promotion within a certain period of time, businesses tend to have ebbs and flows of promoting and hiring. When thinking big, your timescales should be a relatively broad bracket – for example, 2–3 years rather than exactly 2 years – to account for any changes outside your control.

- **Determine goals:** break your desired career path into steps to make it manageable. Your goals should focus on the next stage in the path, but you should always keep the overall strategy in mind.

- **Decide attainable actions:** consider the resources available to you when thinking about the next steps in your career. For example, an internship within a leading agency might be great for your CV and future prospects, but can you afford to work for three months with only your expenses paid?
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- **Set priorities:** through surveying the skills and experience required for future job roles, you will undoubtedly develop a long to-do list. Make this more manageable by identifying the most important skills and experiences to develop, and focusing on these in the short term.

Recording your progress is as important as regularly updating and re-evaluating your career plan. Acknowledge and celebrate your success and progress – a career spans a long period of time and your plans will change over time based on the priorities in your life.

**Career development planning**

By working through this section you will gather the information you need in order to create your personal career development plan. The creation of the plan falls into four stages.

1. **Identify your objectives.** In this case, your objective is the career pathway that you identified earlier in this unit as appealing to you most.

2. **Assess your current skill set.** This is where you take account of your strengths and weaknesses and personal attributes, and assess which areas you need to develop in order to achieve your career goal.

3. **Identify your options.** This is where you review the resources available to you in order to help you address your areas for improvement. By the end of this stage you should have identified a broad range, but not necessarily settled on which options to pursue.

4. **Create and follow your action plan.** This is where you decide how you will work towards your career objective. You should review the action plan on a regular basis so you can assess your progress and update it if your overall objective changes.

**2 Strengths and weaknesses**

**Skills**

When a job is advertised, you will usually see that a set of essential (and sometimes desirable) skills are included within the advert. Once you have identified your next steps on your career path, you should be able to identify the kind of skills that you need to develop to take this next step.

**General, transferable and PR-specific skills**

PR professionals generally require a broad range of skills. These can typically fall into three categories.

- **General** skills are useful in many situations and generally relate to the manner in which you approach your work.
- **Transferable** skills are broad skills that are useful in most employment situations, whether another area of PR or an entirely different industry.
- **PR-specific** skills are the key skills needed for specific job roles within the PR industry. They may also be useful in some other industries.
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Table 14.2.1: General, transferable and PR-specific skills

Some of these skills are included in Table 14.2.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General skills</th>
<th>Transferable skills</th>
<th>PR-specific skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Problem solving</td>
<td>• Time management</td>
<td>• Press release-writing skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Decision making</td>
<td>• Team working</td>
<td>• Blogging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flexibility</td>
<td>• Proactivity</td>
<td>• Digital skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adaptability</td>
<td>• Deadline management</td>
<td>• Confident presentation and public speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Numeracy</td>
<td>• Workload prioritisation</td>
<td>• Excellent networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• IT and digital communication</td>
<td>• Communication skills</td>
<td>• Creative thinking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High levels of literacy</td>
<td>• Meeting work targets</td>
<td>• Data and analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Project planning</td>
<td>• Crisis management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Research</td>
<td>• Reputation strategy management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• People management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Good organisational skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-motivation and autonomy

Self-motivation and autonomy are particularly relevant skills in PR. The PR industry needs driven self-starters who proactively seek new opportunities. Demonstrate these skills – combined with a healthy dose of commercial understanding and a keen knowledge of your organisation’s objectives – and you will be on the right track for the next step in your career.

Self-assessment

Once you know the kind of skills needed for your next career step, you need to assess your own level of these skills.

It is important at this stage to be honest about whether you can produce evidence that you have these skills. For example, you may feel that your problem-solving skills are strong, but can you identify any examples from your work that illustrate these skills? Employers looking for specific skills will want evidence that you have these before they employ you.

Skills audit

A skills audit can help you to assess your skill levels. However, when conducting a skills audit, it is important that you take into account evidence to support your skills assessment. This will help you to think of responses to interview questions or supporting evidence to present to your manager when looking for the next step in your career plan.
A skills audit may look like the one shown in Table 14.2.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Ability rating 0–5 (0 = no experience; 5 = highly experienced)</th>
<th>Supporting evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team working</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Worked effectively in a number of teams. Account manager said that my contribution was invaluable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People management</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>I have no line management experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Worked with the account executive to execute online strategy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 14.2.2: Example skills audit**

**Activity**

Follow the steps below to conduct a basic audit of your skills, similar to Table 14.2.2. Keep a record of this audit as it will help you in working towards the assessment requirements for this unit.

1. List all the skills required for your next step on your career path. This may include specific PR skills such as presentation skills and press release writing, and more general skills such as problem solving, decision making, flexibility and adaptability.

2. For each skill listed, score yourself between 0 (no experience) and 5 (highly experienced).

3. Now, for each skill you have scored 1 and higher, write down an example of how you have demonstrated this skill.

4. Once you have written your examples, reassess your scores. Are any 1s under-scored? Are any 5s over-scored?

If you want to take this self-assessment further, try the National Careers Service Skills Health Check at [https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/tools/skillshealthcheck](https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/tools/skillshealthcheck).

**Appraisals**

You will have regular (potentially monthly, quarterly or annually, but perhaps also project-specific) appraisals of your performance with your line manager. As you learned in Unit 1, it is important to encourage and be open to feedback from colleagues when preparing for your appraisal. It is equally important to take an honest look at your skills audit and identify areas for improvement.

Your line manager will be able to support you in working towards your career goals. Although they may not be able to offer you immediate promotion, or say when a promotion might be likely, they can help you gain experience and develop the skills you need for the next step in your career.
It is useful for your employer to support you in developing these skills. This means that they will be strengthening the skills base within the organisation. It also means you are likely to feel more rewarded and challenged by your employer – making it less likely that you will take your skills to a competitor.

3 Personal attributes

Through researching the skills required for your next rung on the career ladder, you may have noticed that not all prerequisites for these roles are skills based. There are a number of personal attributes that you can work on, or at least be aware of, that will help you to make the next step.

Experience

When reviewing the requirements for your next career move, you will often see ‘experience’ used in two contexts:

- ‘X years’ experience within a PR environment’ - this generally indicates whether this is an entry-level job, a next-step position or a senior appointment.
- ‘Experience of winning business through leading creative pitches’ (or similar) - this indicates that previous experience of aspects of the role is required.

Work experience and training

While you can gather years of experience through dedication and patience, you may need to be proactive to gain experience of specific roles or tasks. There are several ways in which you can broaden your experience base.

- Through your current employment – make your line manager aware that you are interested in gaining experience in the skills or part of the business required, and be open to thinking about how you can develop relevant experiences in the project you are currently working on.
- Work-based training – there may be opportunities for formal or informal work-based training to give you structured experience. This could include internal training courses and professional development schemes, but may also involve work shadowing.
- Secondment – within a large organisation you may be able to arrange a temporary move to a different role or department within the same organisation. Secondments can vary in length and are often designed to fill short-term vacancies.
- Work placements – if there are no opportunities to develop this experience with your current employer, an alternative option would be to arrange some voluntary work for a week or so, taking holiday to complete your voluntary work. You would need to discuss this with your line manager to make sure they felt there was no conflict of interest.
- Temporary contracts – if you leave your current employer and want to focus on developing experience of a number of different employers and work types, contract work may be suitable for you. This allows you to get short-term (e.g. three months to a year) focused experience within a range of employers, but it may feel less secure than permanent employment.

Key term

Conflict of interest – a situation where professional judgement or actions are negatively affected by separate (for example, personal) interests.
Qualifications

Higher education
On completion of this Higher Apprenticeship you will gain a nationally recognised Level 4 qualification backed by the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) and supported by your employer. This is an excellent start to a career in PR, but current PR practices evolve and continuing your professional development will help you to identify and use new techniques as they develop and broaden your experience.

Once you have gained the Higher Apprenticeship qualification, you can work up to a BA degree through part-time study that can be completed alongside your employment.

If this is of interest to you, your training provider should be able to advise you of the options and where to find further information.

Professional qualifications
As covered earlier, a number of professional bodies within PR offer qualifications and training schemes designed for practitioners at different stages in their career. Because these are designed by industry-representative bodies, they will be focused, up to date with current practice and recognised by employers.

Both the PRCA and the CIPR offer a full range of learning and development opportunities and you can find their courses on their websites. It will be your employer who usually funds attendance on these courses, as most PR employers are members of the PRCA or the CIPR.

Take it further
Find out more about the professional qualifications available to PR practitioners from the CIPR and the PRCA:
- CIPR: [www.cipr.co.uk/content/training-qualifications](http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/training-qualifications)
- PRCA: [www.prca.org.uk/pr-training](http://www.prca.org.uk/pr-training)

Testimonials
Few things are more compelling to employers or potential employers than an unprompted positive recommendation from a client, influential colleague or tutor. In the absence of the exact level of experience required, this can be enough to encourage them to give you a chance.

Recommendations may come in a number of forms, from a client informally saying that they are very happy with your work to your manager, to a colleague writing a recommendation on a professional service such as LinkedIn.

While you cannot control what is said or written about your work, you should remember to remain open to feedback. Where a client or colleague identifies things they would like you to do differently, remember that the next time is a chance to impress them with how you have taken their feedback on board.
It is useful to keep a file to collect the positive feedback from clients. It will be a useful reminder of good work when you show these to your line manager at your appraisal meeting.

**Transferable skills and experiences**

The experience you develop in the workplace has an obvious work application. However, you may well demonstrate examples of transferable skills in your life outside work.

An awareness of current events, a personal interest in new communications tools and how they are used within the PR industry, and hobbies with a PR aspect (any activity that helps with networking – for example, a wine club or theatre group) can all provide useful additional sources of experience.

For example, imagine that your current employer is not able to help you develop events-based PR experience, but that is the area you have identified as being your next career step. In your spare time you decide to run a marathon to raise money for a charity. You might have used a range of PR skills to raise awareness of your fundraising efforts and the work your charity does, and you might have organised a fundraising event (a cake sale or bring-and-buy sale, etc.). Although this is on a very different scale from the work undertaken in most PR agencies, it could demonstrate your:

- organisational skills in arranging a venue, products, etc., for the sale
- communication skills in raising awareness of the charity’s work, your fundraising targets, etc.
- networking and influencing skills through convincing people to contribute, negotiating venues, costs, etc.
- creativity through any innovative techniques you used to make your event stand out.

### 4 Building your career plan

**Career strategy**

When you build a career strategy, you should take a top-down approach. This means starting out with the big picture of what you want to do with your career. **Figure 14.2.1** on page 9 shows an example.

Once you have this, you need to break the strategy into smaller goals and targets in order to identify the practical methods of implementing the strategy.
14.2: Personal skills and your career plan

**Skills development**

The next stage in developing your career plan is to look at how you will address the skills development and training needs that you identified (see Figure 14.2.2). You should focus your skills development on the next stage in your career plan, although you may already know some key skills that you will need to develop in later stages.

You should ensure that the skills development activities you identify are realistic and within the resources available to you. If this is not the case, you may be missing opportunities to develop the skills needed for the next stage of your career by focusing on an unachievable opportunity.

**Timescales**

The final stage of building your outline career plan is to identify the timescales involved. The time it takes to move on from one stage in a career depends on a variety of factors, including the size of the company, the wider economy and the individual involved.

When setting timescales, use brackets of time (such as 2-3 years) rather than tying yourself to something too precise (such as 2 years) (see Figure 14.2.3 on page 10). This allows your career plan to take into account a range of circumstances, some of which may be beyond your control.
Portfolio activity 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2

For your assessment for this unit, you will need to demonstrate that you know how to use careers information, understand your personal strengths and weaknesses in relation to your chosen career, and can develop a career plan to address these. For this second part of your assessment, complete the tasks below.

1. Complete a skills audit and determine the relevant skills needed for your chosen career path and your levels of these skills.

2. Describe the new general and transferable skills that you need to develop for your chosen career path.

3. What are the work experience and training options open to you to help develop these skills? How would you go about taking up these options?

4. Produce a career development plan to prepare you for a specified career, spanning the next five years (or longer) as agreed with your assessor or employer, which illustrates the route that you have identified to reach your career goal. Your career development plan must use resources that are available to you, include realistic goals and signpost steps leading towards the ultimate goal. Your career plan must also demonstrate your research into this career.

Further reading


About the author of Topic guides 14.1 and 14.2

Bill Moir coaches individuals to achieve full potential in their chosen field of work and has also implemented tactical learning and development programmes to assist PR organisations achieve their goals through their people.

As a learning and development specialist his work is underpinned by best practice and relevant theory gained from many years experience within various sectors including PR.

His writing and delivery is therefore informed by the expertise of working cross-culturally with an impressive portfolio of organisations. Originally an Education graduate Bill has recently been awarded a Doctorate in the field of Human Relations.