

This document was adapted by Janet Hope from material at frlp.edu.au (downloaded 1/08/2008)

Developing a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)

A Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) is a generic tool borrowed from project management that you can use for a range of purposes. We'll use it over the next couple of sessions to help you develop a career strategy that you can implement over the next 18 months.

The WBS itself is essentially a simple representation of an overall strategy showing how all the parts fit together. It allows you to break down the day-to-day work of implementation into a simple hierarchy of tasks and activities.

The WBS creates a framework to enable you to consider the following critical issues:

- **Define:** What needs to be done?
- **Sequence:** What comes before this activity and what after?
- **Date :** How long will it take?
- **Coordinate:** Who else needs to be involved and what will they need from me in order to help me out?

In working with coaching clients I've found that the greatest benefit of using a WBS is that it provides you with clarity about why you are doing a particular activity – i.e. how completing a particular task will feed into your larger goals.

A WBS also gives you multiple starting points to move towards your larger goals, so that if you find one path is blocked (e.g. you are waiting on external input or feedback) you can switch to another task, confident that you are still working constructively in line with your overall purpose.

Finally, in the context of career strategy, by making a detailed, concrete action plan that you can incorporate into your weekly schedule, you are doing something practical about an issue that can otherwise lurk around the edges of consciousness and sap your energy for other things. Turning vague future hopes into an actual plan can help you see which factors are under your control or influence and which are not. Making the plan very detailed can help you see what resources you would realistically need to commit towards your goal and decide whether or not it's worth pursuing for that 'price'.

Think about involving several people in the WBS process. The more critical thinkers, the better. Put yourself into the mind of your supervisor or mentor. What do they need to know to support your career strategy?

How it works

The WBS operates as a structured list of tasks that need to be completed in order for you to attain your objective.

At the top level of the hierarchy, the activities may be more a description than a specific activity to be executed. At subsequent levels, each defined task should be executable and measurable. You should be able to say precisely what the task is, how long it will take to do, and how it links to other tasks.

The process of developing the WBS is relatively simple, but likely to take several attempts as the first effort may require further refinement after reflection.

There are various ways in which you can develop a WBS. If you were working on a large and highly complex research project, for example, it would be worthwhile using project management software to assist with linking the various tasks, contributors, timelines and processes. However, when working on an individual career strategy you can create an effective WBS using some very simple and unsophisticated techniques with sticky notes. We will use this approach and if you like it, you can later adapt the principles to other tasks according to your needs.

There are various steps involved in the WBS exercise. These are described briefly below and then we will see how that translates into a practical example.

1. Identify all the tasks required to accomplish the goal. Some good questions to ask include: "What are the main tasks I will need to do? How will I do that?" Be very specific and write each onto its own sticky note.
2. Place these on a large wall that will allow you to shift and reorder the stickers.
3. Look at the activities you have listed. Are they broken down into do-able chunks? To check, here are some things to ask yourself:
 - If I were delegating this task to a peer, would it be clear to the other person from this description exactly what they are being asked to do?
 - How does this task compare in size and ease of completion with other tasks that I routinely? If it's much bigger or more challenging than most tasks you do, you are more likely to 'bounce' off it when you see it on your list. Given that working on your career strategy is likely to be less urgent on any given day than other tasks, it's important to define each task so that it is readily achievable.
 - Have I expressed this task according to the 'SMART' criteria – i.e. does it describe a goal that is specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound?
4. If not, add more sticky notes with more specific tasks and keep refining the tasks as you delve into each activity. To illustrate, at the first iteration you might write: "Secure book publishing contract". But there are many activities associated with this: networking and researching to identify potential publishers, reviewing their publication lists, identifying and making contact with individual editors to get a sense of their current and future marketing and publishing plans, developing a targeted proposal, revising your manuscript to fit the market etc.

5. As you work with the activities, you will see the need to reorder some elements and to expand others. Once you feel they are well defined, regroup them into a hierarchical framework where the different objectives are listed logically and sequentially together. Check to see if the sequence is right – have you listed something ahead of a prior task that needs to be done first? Have you missed any crucial steps? Are some of the tasks too big? Do they need more definition?

6. Once you have identified the core components of your strategy, come back to the other elements that need to be managed. What performance management requirements must you meet? How will you enlist the support of others (e.g. collaborators, mentors, supervisors, academic peers and more senior ECAs, research office, professional staff, career advisors, family, prospective alternate employers) and coordinate with them to further develop and implement your strategy? Every element of the strategy needs to be included in your WBS. The more finegrained your early planning, the better.

7. Finally, test the quality of your WBS: does it fully capture your objectives? Are those objectives achieved through the tasks you have listed? Have you met all formal requirements? What information is missing that could help you improve it? (E.g. ARC application timelines, statistics on funding success, inside knowledge about new job possibilities etc)

8. While you have the sticky notes clearly displayed, it's worth trying to estimate how long each task will take. List your estimate in days, or parts of days, as this assists in planning your overall timeline. Make sure you allow for waiting time. For example, hearing back from a publisher/prospective employer/funding.

9. At the same time as you are thinking about time requirements, consider people requirements. If you think someone else's input will be essential or desirable to complete a task, place their initials on the sticky note so that you can start to see where you will need to coordinate with others and take into account their busy times/other priorities as well as yours.

10. Once you are happy with the ordering and breakdown of the tasks, capture it so that you can continue referring to and working with the information over time. I like to capture information using Inspiration software because you can toggle between outline/list view and diagram/map views. If you use a table, it's helpful to give each discrete task a hierarchically based number so that it is clearly nested within a broader structure and related to other activities. You can then list the estimated days and the person responsible in separate columns.