

Advice on planning the next chapter in your personal story

Personal development plans are exclusively, shout- it-from-the-rooftops, all about you. While there's more than one way of putting a plan together, whichever way you choose there's a fundamental thing worth remembering about personal development. There's also a simple mistake to avoid. Ultimately, it's your own plan, the next chapter in your story. Here's how to start writing it.

Putting a personal development plan together

Appraisal season is approaching, bringing with it the traditional 'List'. Sometimes, even the slenderest whisper of personal development can create a kneejerk need to start listing things – future goals, past failings and so on. A list might feel like progress, kind of, but personal development is more than that. It's a definition of who you are and who you want to be. It's shaped by meaningful objectives. If you're not sure about yours, it can be a mistake to rush into a list.

Behavioral statistician Joseph Folkman believes that development plans are more likely to fail when they are “not driven by the individual”. Skip lists for now and instead start by thinking about you, in honest self-evaluation. Focus on your future. What are your development goals over the next 12 months, or maybe the next five years? This might involve emotional fulfilment at work, staying open to new ideas, mental and physical health, and perceptions of yourself and the world around you. These thoughts will shape your personal development plan (PDP), the next chapter in your story. It starts with where you are now and moves towards whatever you want next. You have to think about the end first, which is always the way when writing a story. Where do you want to get to?

SMART objectives

Personal goals can include more than just professional development at work. What are you looking to focus on overall, whether in your career or in your personal life? For example, you might want a change in your personal circumstances (such as finding a new home), or you might feel that your job isn't delivering the values you believe in. These thoughts might help you see that you're looking for additional income, or more recognition at work, or more responsibility. By focusing on broad objectives, you can begin to think about the necessary steps to achieve them. A SMART strategy brings structure to your objectives, making them easier to reach. SMART stands for: Specific: stay focused about what you want to achieve. Measurable: Keeping track of your progress will help boost your motivation. Attainable: Set realistic goals within your control. Relevant: Does your goal fit into your overarching objectives? Timely: Set yourself a deadline, this too will help with focus and motivation.

Writing your personal development plan – with SWOT analysis

Ultimately, your PDP is an action plan. Think of it as a narrative. It begins with where you are right now, then nails down the necessary steps that will help get you to where you want to be.

After you've worked out your objectives, maybe try a strategy such as SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, it's a planning technique widely used to help manage decision-making processes. Think about:

1. Strengths

The skills and attributes you already possess, including your current position at work, your contacts, and your aptitude for bigger and better things. Together, they serve as your springboard towards achieving your objectives. Ask yourself: What do you know you're good at? What skills and attributes give you an advantage over others? What resources or contacts do you have that are unique to you? What do people acknowledge you to be good at? What achievements – whether in or out of work – are you proud of?

2. Weaknesses

The areas you need to improve and develop to meet your objectives. Weakness here doesn't mean 'permanent failing', think of it a temporary gap to be bridged. Weaknesses become weaker once they are identified and managed. Ask yourself: Which skills make you feel queasy when you think about them? Which skills do you know you should be better at than you actually are? What are the barriers in your head that obstruct development? Do you have any habits that get in your way? Do you sometimes feel undermined by a lack of confidence? If so, when?

3. Opportunities

What do you need to achieve your goals? More often than not, you'll need to create your own opportunities. These can range from looking for a new role, a new company, a new contact, or even a new way of life. Once you know what your objectives are, you can identify the opportunities you need to achieve them. Ask yourself: Is your role/company/industry on the up? Is there a sense of momentum? If you're looking for something new, is there an undeveloped niche to explore? Do you know the right contacts who can assist you? Can you hunt down the perfect role, even before it's advertised? Is there something new at work you can do that will stretch your skills?

4. Threats

Change isn't easy. Progress can be obstructed by lack of motivation, lack of obvious opportunities and a lack of support from others. In all these things, where there's a will there's a way – which is why you started with your 'will' (desire/objectives) first. Pursue your objectives. If they matter, you will find a way to achieve them. Ask yourself: What do you need to keep an eye on? Eg, competition, software developments. How far are you able to control your weaknesses, and perhaps soften them? What's on the horizon, externally? For example, is your company about to be sold? Are you making any false

assumptions? If so, think about your earlier self-reflection. Are you overly relying on hope? If so, look again at creating opportunities.

Lifelong process

A personal development plan is not a box to tick at an appraisal, or a list to make yourself feel better. It's a process. It's driven by thought, it's shaped by objectives and it's delivered by action. It can fulfil personal and professional ambitions, via new skills that can benefit both. It's the roadmap to your continuing professional development, which – according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development – is a combination of approaches, ideas and techniques that help you manage your learning and growth. In particular, skills in self-management and wellbeing will help you develop a mindset that's ready for change. According to the NHS, learning new skills is one of five key areas that can support your mental wellbeing. Once you've written your PDP, it doesn't end there. Follow your plan and track whether you are achieving your outcomes or not. Personal development is a lifelong process. It's never too late to start being who you know yourself to be.