SMART Career Goals Guide

Chapter 15.1: Career Exploration and Goal Setting

Introduction to SMART Goal Setting

Setting effective goals is essential for career development. The SMART framework provides a structured approach to creating goals that are clear, actionable, and more likely to be achieved. This guide will help you understand and apply the SMART framework to your career planning.

What are SMART Goals?

SMART is an acronym that stands for:

- **S**pecific: Well-defined and focused
- **M**easurable: Includes concrete criteria for measuring progress
- **A**chievable: Realistic and attainable
- **R**elevant: Aligned with your broader goals and values
- **T**ime-bound: Has a clear deadline or timeframe

The SMART Framework in Detail

S - Specific

Specific goals answer the five "W" questions:

- **What** exactly do I want to accomplish?
- **Why** is this goal important?
- **Who** is involved?
- **Where** will it take place?
- **Which** resources or limits are involved?

Specific Goal Examples

Non-Specific Goal	Specific Goal
"Get better at coding"	"Complete a Python programming course and build a weather data analysis project"
"Find a healthcare job"	"Secure a position as a Certified Nursing Assistant at a long-term care facility in my community"
"Improve my leadership skills"	"Lead a school fundraising project with a team of five students to develop my delegation and coordination abilities"

Tips for Making Goals Specific

- Use action verbs (complete, deliver, build, implement, etc.)

- Provide enough detail that someone else would understand exactly what you intend to accomplish
- Focus on a single, clearly defined outcome rather than multiple objectives
- Be precise about what completion looks like

M - Measurable

Measurable goals include specific criteria for tracking progress and determining when the goal has been achieved.

Ask yourself:

- How much?
- How many?
- How will I know when it is accomplished?
- What specific metrics will indicate success?

Measurable Goal Examples

Non-Measurable Goal	Measurable Goal
"Gain experience in marketing"	"Complete a 120-hour marketing internship and develop three campaign examples for my portfolio"
"Learn about healthcare careers"	"Interview five healthcare professionals in different roles and write a 2-page reflection on each career path"
"Apply for scholarships"	"Submit applications to at least eight scholarships totaling $10,000 in potential funding"

Tips for Making Goals Measurable

- Include specific numbers, amounts, or percentages
- Define concrete deliverables or outputs

- Establish clear criteria for what "done" looks like
- Consider both quantity (how much/many) and quality (how well) metrics

A - Achievable

Achievable goals are realistic and attainable given your resources, constraints, and circumstances.

Ask yourself:

- Do I have the resources, skills, and support needed to achieve this goal?
- Is this goal realistic given my current circumstances?
- Is the goal challenging but still within reach?
- What might prevent me from achieving this goal, and how can I address those obstacles?

Achievable Goal Examples

Potentially Unachievable Goal	Achievable Goal
"Become CEO of a Fortune 500 company within two years of graduating high school"	"Secure a business internship with a local company during my junior year of college to gain entry-level leadership experience"
"Master five foreign languages in one year while working full-time"	"Achieve conversational proficiency in Spanish by practicing for 30 minutes daily and completing one language course over the next year"
"Start a nationwide nonprofit organization as a high school student with no funding"	"Organize a local volunteer initiative addressing a community need with 10-15 classmates and one faculty advisor"

Tips for Making Goals Achievable

- Honestly assess your available time, resources, and skills
- Break larger ambitions into smaller, sequential goals
- Consider what additional resources or support you might need
- Ensure the goal stretches you without being impossible
- Account for potential obstacles and constraints

R - Relevant

Relevant goals align with your broader career aspirations, values, and priorities.

Ask yourself:

- Why is this goal important to me?
- How does it align with my interests, skills, and values?
- How does it connect to my longer-term career vision?
- Is this the right time to pursue this goal?
- Does this goal support my other priorities and objectives?

Relevant Goal Examples

Potentially Irrelevant Goal	Relevant Goal
A student interested in becoming a nurse setting a goal to "complete an advanced accounting certification"	The same student setting a goal to "volunteer 40 hours at a hospital and earn CPR certification to strengthen my nursing school application"
A student passionate about environmental science setting a goal to "learn advanced music production" (with no connection to career interests)	The same student setting a goal to "complete an environmental data analysis project using GIS software to build relevant technical skills"
A student with limited time setting a goal to "join five extracurricular clubs" without considering which align with career interests	The same student setting a goal to "take a leadership position in the business club to develop skills relevant to my entrepreneurship interests"

Tips for Making Goals Relevant

- Clearly articulate how the goal connects to your career aspirations
- Consider how this goal builds on your strengths or addresses development needs
- Ensure the goal aligns with your personal values
- Prioritize goals that advance multiple objectives simultaneously
- Be intentional about why this goal matters to you personally

T - Time-bound

Time-bound goals have a clear deadline or timeframe, creating urgency and helping you prioritize.

Ask yourself:

- When will I complete this goal?
- What can I do today, this week, or this month to progress toward this goal?
- Are there interim milestones I should establish?
- Is the timeframe realistic and appropriate for the scope of the goal?

Time-bound Goal Examples

Non-Time-bound Goal	Time-bound Goal
"Apply to colleges"	"Complete applications to five colleges by November 1, with all essays finalized by October 15"
"Improve my public speaking skills"	"Deliver three prepared speeches to my debate club by the end of the semester, with one speech every three weeks"
"Get job shadowing experience"	"Arrange and complete two job shadowing experiences (4 hours each) with local professionals by January 31"

Tips for Making Goals Time-bound

- Set specific deadlines, not just vague timeframes
- Break longer-term goals into interim milestones with their own deadlines

- Consider whether seasons, school schedules, or application deadlines impact your timing
- Be realistic about how long tasks will take
- Include both start dates and completion dates for complex goals

Common Pitfalls in Career Goal Setting

Watch Out For These Common Mistakes

- **Setting too many goals at once**: Focus on a few high-priority goals rather than trying to accomplish everything simultaneously.
- **Creating vague goals**: Avoid general statements like "get a good job" or "improve my skills" without specifics.
- **Setting goals based on others' expectations**: Ensure your goals reflect your own values and aspirations, not just what others think you should do.
- **Failing to write goals down**: Written goals are more likely to be accomplished than those kept only in your mind.
- **Not revisiting or adjusting goals**: Circumstances change—be willing to refine your goals as you gain new information or experience shifts in priorities.
- **Neglecting to create an action plan**: A goal without specific action steps is just a wish.
- **Setting only outcome goals without process goals**: Include goals about what you'll do (process) as well as what you'll achieve (outcome).

SMART Goal Worksheets

SMART Career Goal Worksheet #1

My Goal: (Write your initial goal here)

Making it SMART:

Specific: What exactly do I want to accomplish? (Include who, what, where, when, why)

Measurable: How will I measure progress and know when I've achieved my goal?

Achievable: Is this goal realistic? What resources and support do I need?

Relevant: How does this goal align with my broader career aspirations and values?

Time-bound: What is my deadline? What are the interim milestones?

Revised SMART Goal: (Rewrite your goal to incorporate all SMART elements)

Action Steps: (List 3-5 specific actions to take toward this goal)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Potential Obstacles: (What might get in your way?)

Solutions: (How will you overcome these obstacles?)

SMART Career Goal Worksheet #2

My Goal: (Write your initial goal here)

Making it SMART:

Specific: What exactly do I want to accomplish? (Include who, what, where, when, why)

Measurable: How will I measure progress and know when I've achieved my goal?

Achievable: Is this goal realistic? What resources and support do I need?

Relevant: How does this goal align with my broader career aspirations and values?

Time-bound: What is my deadline? What are the interim milestones?

Revised SMART Goal: (Rewrite your goal to incorporate all SMART elements)

> (empty box)

Action Steps: (List 3-5 specific actions to take toward this goal)

1. (empty box)

2. (empty box)

3. (empty box)

4. (empty box)

5. (empty box)

Potential Obstacles: (What might get in your way?)

> (empty box)

Solutions: (How will you overcome these obstacles?)

> (empty box)

Career Goal Planning Timeline

Use this timeline to plan goals across different timeframes in your career development:

Short-term Goals (Next 6-12 months)

Mid-term Goals (1-3 years)

Long-term Goals (3-5+ years)

Connections Between Goals

How do your short-term goals support your mid-term and long-term goals?

Final Tips for Career Goal Success

- **Write it down**: Documented goals are more likely to be achieved
- **Share with others**: Tell a trusted mentor, friend, or family member about your goals for accountability
- **Review regularly**: Schedule time to review your goals weekly or monthly
- **Celebrate progress**: Acknowledge achievements along the way, not just at the final destination
- **Be flexible**: Be willing to adjust goals as circumstances change or as you gain new information
- **Connect to values**: Ensure your goals align with what truly matters to you
- **Balance ambition with realism**: Set goals that stretch you without setting yourself up for failure