



CAREER

## PLOTTING YOUR COURSE

Not sure where your career's headed? Our experts give directions for getting your professional life on track and steering it right where you want to go.

Quick—picture your career five years down the road. What image comes to mind? If your vision resembles your TV screen when the cable goes out or, worse, there's no image whatsoever, it's time to roll up your sleeves and get started on a career plan. Creatives, in particular, have trouble focusing on the years ahead, notes Lee Silber, a San Diego-based creative consul-

tant and author of several books including "Organizing From the Right Side of the Brain." "When you look at what makes us creative types wonderful—offbeat, dramatic, divergent, in-the-moment and easily distracted—you can see why we might struggle career-wise," Silber says. But it's precisely when you're *not* struggling professionally that you should plan your

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next steps. When you're thriving at work, you may have more resources and contacts to reach professional goals. If you wait until you're stuck in a rut to map out a career plan, you'll have to work a lot harder.

"Often, designers are blindsided when they suddenly find themselves out of a job due to being fired, layoffs or a company closing. They have no plan in place for dealing with the situation," says Jeff Fisher, engineer of creative identity for Portland, OR-based Jeff Fisher LogoMotivcs and author of "The Savvy Designer's Guide to Success: Ideas and Tactics for a Killer Career."

To prevent this scenario, Fisher advises setting aside time to plan your professional future. "If you schedule time for career planning—like any other project—it will get done," he says.

### DETERMINE YOUR DESTINATION

The natural first step to career planning is establishing a career objective. This is probably the most important part of your career plan—and the trickiest. There's a tendency to select a goal that you feel you *should* have, rather than one that would make you truly happy.

For example, you might decide that your next career step should be a senior graphic designer because that's the next rung of the ladder in your firm, and the title carries more prestige. However, if your current role isn't a good fit, this goal may not ultimately inspire you or enhance your quality of life. Instead, you may spend a year earning the new title only to find your duties remain essentially unchanged.

"I think too often we forget that we have full power to redesign our lives as subtly or dramatically as needed to keep them relevant, interesting and growing," says Tod Martin, owner of Unboundary, an Atlanta-based strategic design studio.

In other words, don't just go for the paint job if a total remodel is needed when developing your professional aspirations. If your goal doesn't excite you, you won't be motivated to reach it.

To help you identify a genuinely rewarding career path, write down what the perfect workday would entail for you, and be specific. Ask yourself the following questions to get yourself thinking:

- Where and what times would you work?

- What kinds of projects would you work on?
- What technologies would you use?
- Would you supervise others?
- How important is structure to you?
- How much decision-making authority would you want to have?
- What kind of person (if anyone at all) would you want to report to?

Take 10 minutes to create a detailed account of what this dream job would look like. The picture that emerges should help point you in the right direction.

If you're still having trouble fleshing out a career goal, Silber recommends looking to a person you admire for inspiration. "Finding someone you can point to and say, 'That's what I want to do,' gives you a huge advantage. You know it's possible, and you can find out how it's possible. Also, you may be able to make this person your mentor."

### SHIFT YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION

Once you've developed a vision for your future, you may not know how to achieve it. That's where research comes into play. Learn *everything* you can about the skills, certifications and experience that can help you get there. Keep in mind that the qualifications in the area you're targeting can change quickly, so stay current on design and employment trends. For example, if your dream job is in print, you may want to hone your InDesign expertise. If your goal is in web design, keep your eye on internet trends, such as the movement toward user-generated content.

Professional networking is another way to find out which skills are hot in your chosen role and which ones are on their way out. Your contacts also can help you map out the necessary steps for reaching your desired position. For instance, if you've determined that you'd like to start your own graphic design business, speak with those who own their own firms and find out how they did it. Your conversations and research will help you outline the steps necessary to reach your goal. Ask questions like these:

- What made you choose this career?
- How did you get your start?
- Can you describe a typical workday?
- How many hours do you work each week?
- What kinds of pressures are you under?
- If you had to do it again, would you choose this route? Why or why not?

Next, you want to break down those steps into a list of action items. Be specific and realistic when creating your list. It's easy to let vague action items slide, and those that are too ambitious may overwhelm you. For example, if you need to sharpen your InDesign expertise, an action item could be to complete an online tutorial or take a class. If your goal is to start your own business, you might put away six months' worth of living expenses. As you check action items off of your list, you'll move closer to meeting your goal.

### PREPARE FOR DETOURS

Avoid getting so caught up in your to-do list that you miss out on unexpected opportunities. Career success

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TOD MARTIN

results from a combination of hard work and luck, and you don't want to overlook a horseshoe if you're standing right on top of one. "One of the most important things a designer can do is to always be prepared for any opportunity that may pop up unexpectedly," Fisher says. "Always have that resume updated. A portfolio of work needs to be kept current, as well."

In fact, if you do only one thing to prepare for your future, update your portfolio regularly. You'd be surprised how quickly the brochure you designed can go out of print or the name of a client can slip your mind. At least twice a year, collect samples of your work and write descriptions to go with them.

You also want to network actively and keep your eyes open, no matter how happy you are in your current role. "It's a great chance to evaluate where you are in the career food chain," Fisher explains. "If a new path is presented as a possibility, it may be time to re-evaluate your career plan."

When it comes to your professional future, having a plan—even if it evolves into something completely different than what you originally envisioned—is far better than no plan at all. Without a vision of your future, it's all too easy to place your career in park. Jim Krause, principal of Jim Krause Design and author of numerous design books, offers this advice: "When I see a professional opportunity in front of me, I always ask myself, 'Is this a lane on the freeway to where I want to go, or is it a parking space where I might end up sitting for the next 10 years?'"

With a fleshed-out plan as your guide, you can greatly increase the likelihood of traveling precisely where you want to go. Now that's a ticket to ride. ■■■

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