

Focus On Individual Development Plan, with a real-life career development plan example

By Lyndsay Swinton

A good individual development plan will help you achieve your potential as it will help you identify skills gaps and improvement areas. Call it an individual development plan, a career development plan or a personal development plan - whatever you fancy - you need to consciously think about your future in order to achieve your potential. Then you'll be able to get that job, go for that promotion, build your business further, or whatever you want.

The following article is republished, with permission, from the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) student magazine September 2006. Find out how one student fairs when challenged to create their own career development plan (example included).

The goal guru

Victoria Ashton speaks to management expert Lyndsay Swinton about the best way to achieve your personal goals.

It is well acknowledged that setting yourself clear goals and writing them down can help turn your dreams into reality. In fact, a well-known 20-year study of Harvard graduates showed that the 3% of those who wrote down their career goals had clearly gained more wealth than the 97% who hadn't.

Lyndsay Swinton, who runs the website Management for the Rest of Us, believes that having goals enables you to know where you are going. 'In my experience from working with different managers, I found those who had clear and meaningful goals were the most enjoyable to work for. They knew their goals and that meant I knew mine too,' she says.

Using her 15-years' experience in motivating, influencing, and leading, Swinton has

developed [guides](#) to help others set goals and write a personal development plan (PDP).

Swinton outlines several benefits of setting goals for yourself. These include:

- getting out of a rut
- taking control of your life
- making your actions match your talk
- focusing on the important things
- finding out what makes you successful, regardless of what that means to other people
- making sure other people understand where you are coming from.

'From a mental health point of view, people have a basic need to achieve. If you don't know what you need to achieve then it's difficult to know if you have,' explains Swinton. 'Many people say "I'm in the wrong job" or "My life is rubbish" - but usually these are the people who probably haven't thought about what their goals are.'

Swinton practices what she preaches. 'Setting goals has enabled me to be where I am now,' she says. 'I used to be focused on my own career, but I also wanted to spend more time with my husband and do something more interesting. My husband, who runs his own business, and I decided to travel and ended up spending some years in New Zealand. We sat down and discussed what our long-term strategy was and set goals for ourselves so that we could realise that strategy. In our case, we wanted to be able to work anywhere in the world. As a result, I set up Management for the Rest of Us, which I manage from Scotland - although this could be done in any country.'

Swinton believes that the goals you set for yourself need to be SMART - that is, specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. She also believes that setting yourself between five and seven goals enables you to focus on and complete these more effectively. 'Once you have set your goals, write a PDP to help you to achieve them,' she explains.

'A PDP allows you to turn your dreams into reality. Break a PDP down into its parts: 'personal' means individual, own, special; 'development' means growth, improvement, advancement; and 'plan' - often the area that most people avoid - means structured preparation, ground-work, and scheduling.'

Writing a PDP allows you to work out how you will achieve your goals. You can also consider which direction to go. Before you start writing a PDP you need to work out

where you are starting from. This, explains Swinton, becomes the 'baseline' from where you measure your progress. In addition, it is also a good idea, before you start to write a PDP, to get feedback from family, friends, and colleagues, in order to find out what others think your strengths and weaknesses are. Ask for constructive and specific feedback so you can find out what you are good at and where you could improve.

Once you identify your goals, you will have to create some areas for development in order to be able to achieve them. Swinton explains: 'Generally, your development areas will fall into two categories - building on existing strengths or developing new skills and competences.'

PDPs can be written using seven steps.

1. Focus areas - three areas that you will be able to use to achieve your goals.
2. Where are you now? - could include feedback gained from others, or your own personal thoughts on where you believe you are.
3. Will be? - a summary of where you will be when you have achieved your goals.
4. How known? - how you will measure your progress for each focus area.
5. Activities and resources - these are the 'tools' that you will use to achieve your goals.
6. When? - it is important to be realistic about when you will achieve your goals.
7. Reward - small rewards once you have achieved a target can give you something to look forward to.

Planning in action

ACCA student Sarah Sharp, management accountant at Homewood Housing Association in Surrey, UK, agreed to use Swinton's guide and write her own PDP. Sarah read the advice on goal setting and put together a draft PDP which was analysed by Swinton.

TABLE 1: GOAL - TO BECOME A FULLY QUALIFIED ACCOUNTANT BY JUNE 2007

Focus area	Now	Will be?	How known?	Activity	Resource	Timing	Reward
Decide a revision schedule	Could do better	Confident that I will be properly prepared for the exams	Good exam passes	Get help with revision plan, focusing on weak areas highlighted by course exam results	Course tutor	Before most exam session	
Follow revision timetable	Tends to fall by the wayside	More confident in myself	Exam success	Gain access to past exam papers	ACCA website	One month before next exam session	One month off from study
Review shortfall in Student Training Record	Incomplete	Completed to demonstrate a suitable level of skill and experience	Records accepted as suitable evidence for ACCA membership	Ask for constructive feedback to help me assess my achievements	Work colleagues, in particular my line manager and the chief executive	In the next two months, and again in January 2007	Throw a party

Planning in action

Expert feedback

This candidate has adopted a very structured approach, using both the PDP and

goal-setting guidance together. I think this candidate is highly likely to achieve their goal. In the PDP, there is a comment about getting constructive feedback from her work colleagues and boss, which shows great self-awareness and recognition that other people can help you improve - it's not a lone journey. Also, I like the fact the candidate is planning to talk to her chief executive, because it is always good to be talking early to senior managers if that's where your career is heading. I'd be slightly concerned by the comment about revision timetables falling by the wayside, and would expect to see some more detail about what the candidate can do to improve on this.

Student feedback

'The whole process has been constructive from my point of view,' says Sarah. 'It has helped me to focus on the steps needed to achieve my goals, rather than looking at the end result, which can be quite daunting.'

Investing in your future

Identifying your goals and working out a plan to achieve them might take some time - but, Swinton believes, the process is incredibly satisfying. 'In addition to setting the goals you will achieve, the feeling that you have completed something worthwhile builds your confidence and boosts your self esteem.'

Useful development resources

- *What Color is Your Parachute?* ISBN 1 580 08727 2
- *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* ISBN 0 684 85839 8

Lyndsay Swinton's [goal setting](#) and [personal development guides](#) are available, priced \$9.95, from www.mftrou.com. This website also contains a host of useful resources for managing your life and career.

By Lyndsay Swinton

Owner, Management for the Rest of Us

www.mftrou.com

[Signup for Monthly Management Tips here](#)