



Michael A. Broscio, CMF Jay E. Scherer, CMF

What's Your Plan?

Why a well-thought-out career plan is essential in today's environment.

In the rapidly changing healthcare field, executives need a career plan more than ever before. Just as the healthcare environment is no longer predictable, the days of the linear, traditional career path are well behind us. If the field is changing dynamically and you're not proactively managing your career, your career success and goal achievements will be at risk.

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Given the dynamics of the marketplace, you may wonder, "Why bother with a career plan if the healthcare environment is constantly changing?" To start, ask yourself this: Would your organization give up on creating a strategic plan for that very reason? Just as a strategic plan gives your organization direction, a career plan gives you some level of control in a chaotic healthcare world. It helps you keep in touch with the market and allows you to respond to its changes. A good plan also helps to ensure your skillset stays current and relevant and anticipates the needs of a changing market.

But how many of us really have a career plan? In a 2013 survey, a group of ACHE members were asked whether they had a career plan. Of 1,100 respondents, only 28 percent said they had a plan firmly in place. Do you?

Why Will a Career Plan Make a Difference for Me?

A good plan can give you energy and provide an edge during a dynamic and difficult career stretch, which any of us can experience. Being discouraged about career progress, working with a difficult boss or co-worker or worrying about your employer's viability can drain your energy and on some days cause you to feel like you are in a dark cave, not sure where to go next and not seeing what is ahead. A good plan, on the other hand, helps turn the cave into a tunnel, even if there is just a small bit of light at the end, because it gives you direction and a sense of hope for a positive and successful future.

Let's take a look at three situations in which a career plan can have a significant impact on your success:

If your organization were to be acquired tomorrow, and there was an announcement of significant downsizing making the elimination of your position likely, would you be

ready? Without a plan in place, you would probably not be sure where to start or what to do to ready yourself for this change. This type of unexpected change also feeds emotions, making planning and thinking clearly about your future more difficult, just at a time when you need to be very clear in your decision making. However, having a plan in place that identifies actions and steps needed to meet your goals, and that includes skillsets needed to be marketable in your field, will increase your chances of success. Although you may still be disappointed, you have already given some thought about your future, and you won't feel the anxiety of starting from square one. Having a career plan in place before disaster strikes will help you be better able to respond.

Another situation in which a career plan can help facilitate your success is when opportunity knocks. Say, for example, your new boss has just been given a major new project, and she

needs a project leader. The project is extremely interesting to you, will be high profile and could be a launching point. You ask your boss to consider you for the lead role, but the feedback is that you lack the project management experience and certification required, in spite of your solid technical abilities. Your reaction is anger—mostly at yourself for putting off the project management certification program you were thinking about, and for not volunteering for more projects. Had you created a good plan, it may have helped you take action consistent with your needs and those of your organization; you would have been better prepared for the opportunity.

One last scenario related to succession planning is not uncommon. You

believe you are in line to become COO and have been told by your boss, the current COO, that you are the leading candidate to move into that position when he retires in a few years. He also has indicated there would be some good development opportunities for you, but you never followed up on that conversation. You have been impatiently waiting and are surprised when an outside candidate is named to the role. After calming down and having a discussion with your boss, he indicates you did not get the role because the CEO didn't believe you had developed the necessary change-leadership skills and that you needed to demonstrate more effectiveness in collaboration and consensus building, especially with physicians. What should you

have done differently? Could a career plan have helped?

What Does a Career Plan Look Like?

“Yes, I have a career plan,” is a common answer we hear from executives. But when we ask these individuals to describe their career plans in detail or to see an actual document, we often get very little substance.

A career plan is like a strategic plan for an individual. One of its primary purposes is to help you establish a direction and make good, consistent decisions related to your career progression, based on accurate information.

An effective career plan also helps you collect and organize information



in a way that makes sense for you so you can take action, track your progress and anticipate risks and opportunities in pursuit of your goals. Most importantly, your career plan should be something that you put time into developing, that you believe in and that helps to inspire and motivate you to take action consistent with what is important to you, your family, your organization and the marketplace.

Career plans should be strategic, but they also must be flexible. You should look at your career plan at least once a year, but twice is better given the pace of change in the field. Most organizations have strategic plans that are updated regularly. You should approach your career plan in the same way.

How Do I Build a Career Plan?

Before you can create a career plan, you need a process for developing one that's right for you. To begin, ask yourself these four important career planning questions related to your current role or one you aspire to.

- What is important to me, and what do **I require for fulfillment** in my work and life?
- What does my current or a future **employer contribute that meets my requirements** for fulfillment?
- What is **required of me** to be successful by my current or a future employer?
- What do **I contribute** to my current or a future employer's success?

The process of answering these questions forms the basis of a good plan. It also requires preparation and thought—a step many people skip but that is a critical component of forming a good plan. The plan really begins to take shape when you ask this fifth question: “**What am I doing well** (and not so well) to meet my current or a potential employer's needs, and **what is my current or a potential employer doing well** (or not so well) to meet my needs?” Your answers will facilitate development of a reality-based plan that will help you achieve your goals and your current/future employer's goals in a balanced way. In the sidebar on this page we have outlined several key components of a strategic career plan. The plan is a constantly evolving document that should be an integral part of your career management efforts.

The Key Components of a Career Plan

A strategic career plan should have these core components:

- Statement of your short- and long-term goals, clearly outlined but flexible based on the iterative process of building a plan to meet your needs, your employer's needs and the market's needs
- Concise but complete summary of:
 - Your answers to the five key questions presented in this article, including analysis of gaps between your needs and aspirations and the reality of your current situation and marketplace requirements
 - Your value proposition today, what you would like it to be (or what it needs to be) in the future and how this positions you to reach your goals
- Action steps to close gaps and achieve your goals, including:
 - Market Research—How do I stay informed?
 - Learning Plan—How do I stay relevant?
 - Personal Marketing—How do I build relationships?
 - Managing Risk—How do I anticipate change and eliminate career barriers?
 - Maintaining Energy—How do I stay motivated and positive?
 - Managing Finances—Can I afford my plan?
 - Identifying Sources of Support—Do I need a coach, mentor or advisor?
- Process to monitor progress, gain feedback and update the plan on an ongoing basis based on changing realities in the marketplace and changes in your thinking.

A career plan is an essential tool for healthcare leaders in today's dynamic healthcare environment. Many leadership experts even list career management as an important competency for success. So what's your plan? If you have one you'll be better prepared for whatever the future may hold. ▲

Michael A. Broscio, CMF, is director, Career Resource Center, at ACHE. He can be reached at mbrosco@ache.org. Jay E. Scherer is president, Scherer Executive Advisors, Chicago, and an ACHE Member. He can be reached at jay@schererexecutiveadvisors.com.

Editor's note: You'll soon be hearing more about new tools ACHE is developing to help members develop effective career plans.