This module provides information and helpful tools that will start you thinking about your career outlook and begin setting or refining career goals. These goals will help you progress in your chosen career path or put you in a new career direction that you believe may be more challenging and rewarding. These tools will help you as you prepare your Individual Development Plan, identifying your specific career goals and how you'll acquire the knowledge and develop the skills necessary to achieve them. Career planning and professional/leadership development is critical to finding out what makes you happy and setting a course that will bring you that happiness. We hope you take the time and opportunity to look through this module and begin thinking about your future.

Are you satisfied with your overall career outlook--wherever you are along that path? Have you planned for your long-term career? Are you in a job or career path that aligns with your interests and work preferences? If your answer to any one of these questions is NO, maybe it’s time you started thinking about clarifying professional goals and developing your career plan. Career planning is an ongoing process that begins with the initial definition of your career goals. Periodically, you must revisit your set of personal career goals and revalidate or adjust your plan based on progress towards meeting your goals, projected needs of the organization, and/or opportunities available within the federal government. Everyone, whether they are support staff, mid-level staff, supervision/management or executives, can benefit tremendously from career planning.

If you’re reading this introduction and looking through this catalog, you’re already interested in developing your leadership or professional capabilities. Deciding to plan how you will achieve your career goals is an important first step in the career planning process. Career planning helps you identify your leadership or professional/technical development needs and possible strategies to achieve them. A career plan can take individuals in several directions that allow them opportunities to shift from senior subject matter expert or technical leadership roles into that of a supervisor, manager or even executive. Your supervisor should also be involved in your career planning efforts so he/she has a better understanding of your professional goals and developmental needs and can provide guidance and support in helping you reach these goals. In addition, in an environment where federal budgets are shrinking, resources are diminishing and the federal job market offers fewer promotion opportunities, carefully considered career planning steps can help you develop a competitive edge so that you are better positioned to progress on a chosen career path when opportunities arise.

So, where to start? Given how busy employees are today, many agencies have begun helping their employees plan their career development strategies by offering career planning tools. One example is the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VA has created the MyCareer@VA career planning process at http://www.mycareeratva.va.gov/Pages/default.aspx. While this process was intended for current VA employees, it can be used by any federal employee to support their career planning efforts. It provides a process that leverages several tools including the My Career Fit Tool, My Career Mapping Tool and the VA Career Guides. This process includes 4 sequential steps:

- Preparing for your long-term career by establishing career goals;
• Exploring career paths that address these goals;
• Planning your career path through preparation of an Individual Development Plan (IDP) that links career goals to needed training and development activities; and
• Developing your knowledge and skills.

As you create a plan for your career, you will have an opportunity to:

• Identify what is important to you and, what interests you most and establishing career goals that align with those interests
• Explore alternative career paths that allow you to act on those interests and preferences
• Develop an IDP with short and long-term career goals; and
• Increase your knowledge and skills, through formal and on-the-job training, developmental opportunities, mentoring relationships, etc., so that you are best positioned to meet those goals.

PREPARE FOR YOUR CAREER

The first step in the career planning process involves reflection and preparation. In order to identify a career path, you will need to consider the following questions: If I am not satisfied with my current position or duties, what is it I want to do? What are my true work interests and, what kind of work environments do I prefer? You should be aware of your work interests and preferences so that you can make decisions about a career path that aligns with those interests and preferences, whether it is to make a change to your current career path or continue to work toward greater and higher levels of responsibility in your chosen profession.

The My Career Fit Tool at http://mycareeratva.va.gov/careerfittool/ provides an interactive questionnaire designed to help you better understand your work interests and work environment preferences. The tool translates your responses into potential career options that may be a good fit for you based on your personal and professional preferences. As you answer various questions regarding your likes and dislikes with respect to your work interests and environment, the tool will determine which job matches provide the best fit for you. When you’ve completed all the questions (and all questions must be completed for the tool to work) and request the tool to show all job matches, it will return your work interests and work environment scores and a listing of job matches from greatest fit to minimal fit. The tool allows you to filter this listing by the amount of experience needed for these jobs and by occupational family.

Another important aspect of identifying you work interests is discovering what motivates you to succeed. There are many potential motivators. For example, are you interested in public service or financial gain? Do you desire a supervisory or leadership position? These are important aspects to consider when making career decisions and identifying those career paths that will allow you to address your specific interests and preferences while satisfying what internally motivates you to perform and succeed. Understanding these helps provide the overall context in career decisions.

Whether you are ready or prepared to serve in a supervisory or leadership position is also an important question to ask yourself. For many of us who have our sights set on a Senior Executive Position, serving in a supervisory or management position would seem to be a logical career progression on the path to
the SES. However, many of us may not yet be ready to serve in this capacity or may not understand or realize what serving in a supervisory or management position truly entails. Conversations with your supervisor about possible acting/detail assignments or a rearrangement of current work to gain additional supervisory or management experience would be beneficial and might help you determine whether supervision and management is the right path for you.

**EXPLORE CAREER PATHS**

The next step in the career planning process is to thoroughly research, explore and learn more about those career paths and occupations you discovered or identified that align closely to your interests and preferences. So, where do you start? One place you can start is the *My Career Mapping Tool* at [https://my.mycareeratva.va.gov/careermapping/select.aspx](https://my.mycareeratva.va.gov/careermapping/select.aspx). This tool allows you to explore various jobs within and beyond your current occupational family, understand what skills and knowledge are needed to be successful in these jobs and build a formatted resume ready for USAJOBS.

Here are some steps to consider or follow:

- You can search for various career paths either by entering a specific job title or by keyword search if you are interested in a more general search
- You can select specific job details by selecting a specific occupational family, the specific job series, job title, and grade level in which you are interested.
- Once you’ve selected all appropriate preferences, you can show the job options that correspond to your selections.
- Up to three of these options can then be compared side-by-side, by clicking on the specific job options you want to compare and clicking on the “Compare (up to 3)” button.
- The side-by-side comparison will show the competencies and knowledge areas, licensures required, and next steps, if applicable, for each of the jobs selected for comparison.

The *VA Career Guides* [http://www.mycareeratva.va.gov/Careerpath/Pages/careerguides.aspx](http://www.mycareeratva.va.gov/Careerpath/Pages/careerguides.aspx) can also be used to research detailed information about each occupational family and career path, including knowledge areas, education and licensure requirements, and the recommended training and developmental experiences needed for each career level.

Several other federal agencies have websites that help you learn more about the various career fields and positions they offer. Although not an exhaustive list of all federal agency websites, following is a listing of cabinet-level agency sites that will help you get started identifying whether other organizations offer career paths or positions that align with your interests and preferences.

- Environmental Protection Agency: [http://www.epa.gov/jobs/](http://www.epa.gov/jobs/)
• U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:  http://www.hhs.gov/careers/
• U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:  
• U.S. Department of State:  http://www.careers.state.gov/
• U.S. Department of Treasury:  http://www.treasury.gov/careers/Pages/default.aspx
• Office of Management and Budget:  http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/recruit
• Office of the United States Trade Representative:  http://www.ustr.gov/about-us/human-resources/employment
• Small Business Administration:  http://www.sba.gov/about-sba-services/join-our-team
• USAJOBS:  https://www.usajobs.gov/

PLAN YOUR CAREER PATH

This is probably no surprise to you, but a very critical step in planning your career path is the creation of an Individual Development Plan that establishes specific career goals for knowledge to be learned, skills to be built and experiences/activities to help prepare the way to a new career. But, how do you go about creating an IDP? The Office of Personnel Management has an excellent link: 
http://www.opm.gov/wiki/training/Individual-Development-Plans.ashx that provides helpful information about IDPs and, how the process of developing IDPs supports your overall career development. This site walks you through the process of developing your IDP by asking the following questions:

• How can I utilize an IDP in my agency?
• How do you go about developing an IDP?
• How are other organizations using the IDP?
• Where can employees find training and development opportunities?
• What other tools and resources are available for me?

It’s important to note that, preparation of an IDP is not only a part of the planning step, it is an integral part of overall career planning. For some of you, development of an IDP may be a required activity that you do routinely on an annual basis. Sometimes, people get to a point where these routine activities are conducted on “auto-pilot” without much effort or thought (They have “checked the box” with limited or no gain in knowledge or skills). However, if you are going to be competitive for your next position or promotion, you should view your IDP as a tremendous opportunity to shape the course and results of your career plans. In addition to using an IDP to identify training classes, on-line courses or conferences you should attend, this tool should be used to make decisions about what is important to you with respect to your career and what you need to do to make your career more satisfying - even if it means changing your career path.
We are all at different stages of our careers, so everyone will have different developmental needs that will translate into different short-term and long-term career goals for our future. Having an effective and thoughtfully considered IDP will help you to identify and clarify specific goals to determine what you need to do in order to achieve them. You can begin to develop your career goals and activities by asking the following questions:

- Do you want to remain in your current position and progress within it?
- Are you interested in finding a new job or totally different career field?
- Would you like to find similar work in a different geographic area or career path?
- Should you make a move to another job that is better aligned with your interests and preferences?
- What new knowledge or skills will you need in order to qualify for and/or perform the duties of the goal position?
- Can these be learned on the job or must you enroll in outside education programs?
- If needed, is there a “bridge” position you can pursue that will help you qualify for the new position? If yes, what are your options to be selected or reassigned to it?
- If you need to acquire a new or advanced degree, are their colleges or universities nearby who offer the required courses?
- Is there financial assistance you can obtain from your employer to attend those courses and position yourself to compete for it? Can you provide justifications to qualify for that financial assistance? Are there service payback restrictions in accepting such assistance?
- If you need additional supervisory or management experience, what detail opportunities or work assignments are available to meet this need?
- What will you need to sacrifice to be successful?
- Is anyone else impacted by your career choice? If yes, how are they impacted and, are any adjustments needed?
- How or when will you know if you have chosen the “best” career path?

While there is no one best way to prepare an IDP, most IDPs include your short and long-term career goals and estimated dates for when you expect to reach these goals. IDPs should define what your development objectives are that will help you reach these goals. To the extent possible, they also align with the overall mission goals and objectives of your agency or organization. The IDP should list the various opportunities you have available for training, skill and knowledge development such as:

- on-the job training with progressively higher level duties and more responsibilities,
- approved training courses,
- free training programs or seminars offered by OPM or other agencies,
- targeted readings,
- rotational, shadow and detail assignments, and
- special projects.

To gain the most benefit from an IDP, it should be prepared in coordination with your current supervisor and, if you have one, a mentor. Once implemented, you should discuss your progress with your supervisor (and mentor) at least quarterly and update it as you complete, modify or delete planned...
activities. These discussions can confirm you are on track and making progress in your career development.

*Special note:* IDPs are not just for career planning or finding a new job. IDPs can also be very helpful and effective for helping you to improve knowledge and skills in your current position and preparing you for higher-level projects or assignments with greater responsibilities. In order to be considered for promotion in your chosen field, there will always be a need to demonstrate the required knowledge and skills at the next level. Having an IDP that includes knowledge and skills benchmarks for the next higher level and – fully demonstrating the same – is one of the best ways to demonstrate your promotion potential.

The OPM site provides several templates used by various federal agencies that allow for documenting and recording key information in your career planning process and tracking your progress to determine how well you are meeting your identified goals. In addition to the agencies listed on OPM’s site, the VA also provides an IDP template. Some of these templates may offer sections to record your interests and preferences identify your career goals, list the career paths or occupations which align with your interests and preferences and any skills you need to develop, to achieve them and identify and prioritize those competencies that you must further develop. You should take some time to go through these various templates to determine which one may best meet your IDP needs.

Templates:

- U.S. Department of Justice - LEAP
- U.S. Department of Labor
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- U.S. Department of Navy
- U.S. Small Business Administration
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Treasury
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

In addition, HR University at www.hru.gov, has an online IDP process to help you create an IDP. You will need to register in order to use the “Create My IDP” function.

**DEVELOP YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

Now that you’ve prepared your IDP and shared it with your supervisor and/or mentor it’s time to put your IDP into action! You need to begin to build the knowledge, skills and experiences identified in the planning phase. You can do this by securing approval and agency support to register for appropriate or required training courses and seminars, gaining new experiences and building relationships with mentors and colleagues to help you achieve your goals. The “Leadership Development Seminars January 2013 Edition” catalog and readings provide several training opportunities that can assist you in building your skills and knowledge while helping you grow in the five Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) and Fundamental Competencies.
Your supervisor or manager should also serve as a good resource for helping you develop the knowledge and skills you need during this preparation phase. Supervisors should be able to recommend or help you identify appropriate on-the-job developmental activities such as special projects, details within your agency or assist you to research and determine if suitable opportunities may be available in other agencies.

While it is important to identify what you need to do in order to improve your skills and competencies, it is also important to get feedback from others about their perspectives on your job knowledge, skills, abilities and the results of your efforts. It is recommended that you and your supervisor meet at least quarterly to review and discuss progress on completing the IDP action items and, your overall performance in your current position. If you are currently a supervisor, feedback from others, such as through the use of a Leadership 360 Assessment instrument, will help you figure out those skill areas or competencies for which you may need additional improvement. OPM offer 360 Feedback services and provides information about their services and how they benefit Federal supervisors, managers and executives at http://www.opm.gov/hr/employ/products/survey/leadership360.asp. If your agency is not planning to offer participation for a group of managers in the 360 process through OPM, it is also possible to utilize private industry sources to conduct a Leadership 360 Assessment.

**MENTORS**

It is also important to seek out and develop a mentoring relationship. Mentoring can be a formal or informal relationship between two people, one of whom is often in a senior position who serves as the mentor and the other is often in a junior position who serves as the protégé. Mentors can serve an important role in your career development by providing training and coaching on specific skill areas, sharing resources and networks that can help you move forward in your career, challenging you to move beyond your comfort zone, exposing you to different perspectives and experiences, creating a learning environment in which you feel comfortable taking risks and focusing on your total career development. OPM’s website at http://www.opm.gov/hrd/lead/mentoring.asp provides information about mentoring as part of its training and development policies.

Your supervisor or agency training representative should be able to tell you whether your agency has a formal mentoring program in place. If your agency does not, you should consider entering into an informal relationship by seeking out senior level employees or other individuals with whom you can discuss your career planning efforts and who can provide advice and guidance to help you reach your career goals.

Some agencies have formal mentoring programs in place that are structured and provide clear and specific organizational goals. Below are links to a couple of agencies that offer formal mentoring programs.

- U.S. Department of Commerce: http://hr.commerce.gov/Employees/TrainingandDevelopment/DEV01_006099
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: https://mentoring.hhs.gov/

**CONCLUSION**
We hope this planning process brings you closer to achieving your career goals and objectives. Some of the ideas and recommendations in this process may have caused you to step out of your comfort zone and make some decisions that might not only be career changing, but life altering. Career planning and professional development is about finding out what makes you happy and setting a course that will bring you that happiness and career success, however you choose to define it. Along the way, you will need to maintain your courage, stay flexible and be willing to make adjustments to maximize your potential for success. Only you can determine what will make you happier and best support your career development. Finally, a quote to live and work by:

“The worst days of those who enjoy what they do, are better than the best days of those who don’t”.

– E. James Rohn