

How to Create Your Professional Development Plan

Thirty years ago, if you joined a mature enterprise as an employee, you were told what skills you needed to learn, when you would receive training for these skills and where your likely career path headed (with the same employer). Today, the accepted employment model compels *you* to be accountable for your professional development, not your employer.

Professionals today have embraced this change in responsibility and are interested in managing their own career. However, many don't take advantage of an available, reliable tool for doing this: a professional development plan.

Professional development plans are not new. I know five top HR professionals at large; successful enterprises have encouraged their fellow employees to use a version of this for the past fifteen years. HR professionals focus on providing leaders with what they need to deliver effective feedback and manage employee performance. Talent development is often coalesced with performance management. But I believe that talent development should be separate from performance management, and it starts with the employee taking action to identify their own development objectives.

My version of a professional development plan starts with defining the top two skills that you wish to learn/master this year. While this approach sounds straightforward, many initially choose broad areas of interest without explicitly defining the essential skills required. Below is an example of what I typically see in an initial draft:

#	Development Objective (Area of Interest)
1	I wish to demonstrate executive presence in all interactions
2	I'd like to be a world-class presenter to large audiences

Areas of interest represent a positive first step for employees, but they are not skills defined at a level to depict meaningful development activities. More granularity in the skill definition is required before development activities can be determined.

Consider the case of someone wishing to be a good parent. For me, parenting represents the most difficult challenge in life which requires not only a diverse body of skills but a high level of creativity. Changing a diaper with one hand while holding a cell phone to your ear listening carefully to what your spouse needs you to pick up at the grocery store is an essential parenting skill. This aptitude for multitasking is important, but it does not embody everything you need to be able to do to be a great parent. Development objectives are most valuable when they are specific to a single skill. Without the element of granularity, it is difficult to incorporate development activities specific to the mastery of the skill. Someone aspiring to be a better parent wouldn't want to use broad language, like "be a better parent" as the development objective, but instead would want to select a specific skill: e.g.,

demonstrate active and empathetic listening before offering advice. The more concise the skill description, the easier it is to identify development activities to pursue. The act of honing the area of interest into a defined skill by writing it down actually helps you refine the focus while also leading to you embracing the commitment required to develop the skill.

#	Development Objectives (v 1.0)
1	Demonstrate the ability to apply a criterion to potential professional opportunities before making a commitment to fulfill them
2	Produce professional content that is shorter in length and highly readable to share broadly with other professionals

The two skills identified above are my development objectives for 2025. I continue the practice of preparing a development plan even in my current life stage of semi-retirement. A good rule of thumb is to use as few words as possible when defining the skill. I include a version number to track the improvements that I make when integrating feedback from my stakeholders. Documenting the skills you choose is essential, as is sharing them with others (your leader, mentor, colleague or family member, etc.). By exposing your ideas and objectives to others, you can gain valuable input and refine your skills with more clarity.

Once you have clearly defined and written down your Development Objectives, the next step is to identify Development Activities aligned with each objective. Development Activities could include reading a white paper, watching a YouTube video, or taking an on-line class to learn the techniques essential for demonstrating a skill.

Development Activities also should include ways to proactively practice the desired skill while openly gathering feedback from others to continue to improve. They may include seeking the help of a developmental mentor (e.g., someone who has demonstrated competence in the skill you've chosen) who can share information about their experience of what worked or didn't for them.

To select appropriate development activities, it is important to first assess your current skill level and identify any gaps between where you are and where you want to be. Consider the learning style that suits you best, whether it be visual, auditory, or hands-on, and choose activities that align with that style. Finally, set realistic timeframe for each activity to ensure they contribute effectively to your development objectives.

#	Development Objective	#	Development Activities	Completion date
1	Demonstrate the ability to apply a criterion to potential professional opportunities before making a commitment to fulfill them	1	Document the criterion for use	12/12/2024

		2	Review the criterion with family members impacted	12/20/2024
		3	Apply the criterion to proposed work activities prior to making a commitment	1/3/2025
2	Produce professional content that is shorter in length and highly readable to share broadly with other professionals	1	Review sources of concise language	1/5/2025
		2	Use Wordtune to rewrite phrases	1/9/2025
		3	Edit content using an LLM	1/10/2025
		4	Show content to others and solicit feedback	1/12/2025
		5	Publish the content on LI and monitor comments seeking techniques to improve readability	3/1/2025

To summarize, there are two primary components of a professional development plan:

1. The professional development objectives
2. The development activities

You, the author or professional, own the first component and need to choose the specific skills desired. This is a personal decision, but I believe in the best practice of accepting input from others to shape your development plan. The rationale for your decision does not have to be shared with others...it's often personal. For example, I may wish to take a CISO role in the future (highly unlikely!) and may choose to master a skill aligned to this objective. But my advisory clients may not want me to pursue a CISO role. It's a personal decision and can remain so.

An existing model that has similarities is your company's matching gift program for charitable contributions. The decision you make, as an employee, selecting a charitable cause is personal and may relate to a family member or friend. You don't have to share the rationale for your choice of charitable organization(s) with your company. Your company may match your gift if the charitable organization meets a pre-determined criteria (501(C) benefiting both you and the organization. Professional development plans work the same way. You make the decision and commitment while the enterprise (through your leader) may provide specific development activities that you can participate in and benefit from.

Highly effective leaders recognize that understanding they're employees' Development Objectives is more likely to drive the successful achievement of those objectives, resulting in solid employee performance. They will encourage employees to select the skills they wish to master and then adapt their role to prioritize meaningful development activities for the employee to pursue. This represents an investment in talent development rather than

talent retention. No employees wish to be retained. They desire to learn so demonstrating a commitment to talent development helps organizations develop and attract top talent.

It all starts with a professional development plan and a few decisions on the desired development objectives. The rationale for two objectives and not six or more is that humans have a finite capacity to invest in their development. It's better to concentrate the capacity to two skills rather than multiple skills to enable a deeper investment in development activities and higher likelihood of demonstrated competency.

Going deeper in a set of development activities in the pursuit of two skills results in professionals with more choices (marketability). This is a benefit to the employee AND the employer. If a talented employee chooses to pursue their career within an enterprise due to the commitment made to them to learn what they wish, then that employee is more likely to attract other top talent to the organization. Most employees don't leave a job for more money, they leave to learn something specific, and more money is the result of their departure.

The beauty of using a professional development plan is that you don't have to ask anyone for permission to use it. It's your decision how to represent your desired learning objectives. You can make this decision with the benefit of input from your leader and/or colleagues or not. It's your choice and prerogative. I strongly recommend that you write it down choosing a format and style that makes the most sense for you. Feel free to use my examples as reference and share these ideas with others. The start of a new calendar year is an excellent time to embark on a new development journey with two new skills to pursue and master, but you can create a plan at any point. All it takes is an idea and a commitment.

*I have used a professional development plan for over two decades and continues to use it today. It remains a cornerstone of my professional fulfillment. I am fortunate to be able to interact with over eighty formal mentees most of which are cyber security professionals. The example in this paper is my actual development plan for 2025. Feel free to share with me recommended development activities that I can benefit from; I welcome your thoughts. If you are a leader, please encourage the professionals that you work with today to create a professional development plan so that you can support them by sponsoring development activities and adjusting their roles enabling them to pursue their professional passion.

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