

How to set and achieve professional goals in 2024

Goals give us a sense of purpose and something to aim for in life. Career goals can be especially valuable – they can set you on track to a change or new role that you find fulfilling and rewarding.

Plenty of us have career goals, but we're often faced with stumbling blocks as we pursue them. Research for SEEK shows that 39% of Kiwis find setting career goals overwhelming and that 31% of candidates don't keep track of their career goals at all.

It's great to aim big, but if a goal isn't realistic, it can be harder to stick to – and you might set yourself up to miss. A positive, realistic goal that you reach one step at a time will keep you motivated, and there's no greater sense of achievement than reaching a hard-won goal.

Leah Lambart is a career coach with [Relaunch Me](#) and an expert in achieving career goals. Here are her five key tactics for setting realistic, achievable goals for your working life.

1. **Get ready to focus**

Achieving a major goal takes time, energy and commitment. Thinking about why your goal is important to you can help you stay focused and committed for the long term, Lambart says. An “accountability buddy” can help you keep you on track, too, she adds.

“This could be a friend, colleague, or even a career coach or mentor. 33% of candidates say that having a mentor [has helped them with career goals](#). As mentors have ‘been there, done that’ in life and the workplace, they can enable you to bypass the traps for beginners that sometimes litter work.

As you prepare yourself for change, be wary of negative thinking that might hinder your progress, and try to challenge your inner critic. If you're a perfectionist, this could also hold you back from taking that next step; trying to aim for ‘good’ rather than ‘perfect’ can help.

2.

Think about what you value

The change you're looking for might not simply be a different role or higher income – it could be greater flexibility, [better work-life balance](#), or more meaningful and creative work, Lambart says.

For many people, there are [things that matter more than money](#) such as job security, and spending more time with family, so [thinking about your values](#) can help you find the work that suits you best.

And if you're naturally cautious and wary of taking a risk, remember that there are risks worth taking when it comes to your career.

To help you stick to your goal, focus on the positive change the goal would bring to your life. "It could be more time spent with family, less weekend work, greater work satisfaction, more energy to play with the kids, or more time to take up hobbies," Lambart says.

You'll be more likely to see your career goals through if there's meaning and value attached to them.

3.

Be specific with your goals

Any major change takes time and several steps before achieving it, which can sometimes feel frustrating and overwhelming.

"One way to approach this is to break the change down into smaller steps and make them more specific," Lambart says. "Then the change process will feel less overwhelming and you'll be more likely to commit to it long-term."

If you have a goal in mind, try using the SMART method. Ask yourself whether your goal is:

Specific?— what do I want to accomplish, why, and how?

Measurable?— what evidence is going to show that I'm making progress?

Achievable?— is it something I can reasonably do, or do I need to break it down further?

Relevant?— does the goal really matter to me? Is it the right time?

Time-bound?— when can I achieve it by? What deadlines can I break it down into?

This approach can help you reassess your goals. For example, if you want to become a [Sales Manager](#) this year, but you've just joined the company as a Junior Sales Associate, you may be putting too tight a time limit on yourself – it might take three years.

Or if you want to own your own catering business in eight months but haven't worked in that industry before, you might make a goal to get hands-on experience first before getting a business loan.

4. **Have a timeframe in mind**

As you break the process down into small steps, set a realistic deadline to each step. "That will keep you more accountable and will allow you to focus on the tasks at hand, rather than being overwhelmed by the enormity of a change," Lambart says.

Here's an example from Lambart of a timeline of specific goals you might plan if you're aiming for a career change:

??????In the next month: Complete a career test to get an idea of careers that fit your personality, strengths and interests.

In 2 months: Give yourself a month to research possible career options thoroughly.

In 3 months: Speak to two people in these industries to get further information.

In 5 months: Apply for courses.

A year from now: Start studying and tailor your resume for your new career.

A few months after starting studying: Start the search for relevant, part-time work to complement your studies.

Keep this timeline somewhere you see it often, so you're reminded to stick to it. But if something throws your plans off course, give yourself the flexibility (and permission) to adjust, too.

5. **Make it real**

Tell people about your aspirations. Sharing your goals with supportive people who can encourage you helps to make those goals a reality, Lambart says.

"Surrounding yourself with some cheerleaders will ensure that you have the support you need when things don't go smoothly," she explains. "Ask them to motivate you and keep you focused on your dream when things are a bit tough."

Having a professional network can also provide support in seeing through your goals – [there are plenty of ways you can build and grow your network online](#).

If there's something you want to achieve in your career, or a job you've always dreamed about, setting goals will help you get there. By breaking down your goals into clear, simple steps that are realistic, you'll be less likely to feel overwhelmed. Be open to change, think about your values, and share your goal with your support network – that can be the boost you need.

Remember to stay open to adapting your goal and timeline if your circumstances change. That will help you avoid frustration – because you're in this for the long haul.

By using these strategies you can set achievable goals that you can reach, one step at a time.

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature of behalf of SEEK, interviewing 4000 Kiwis annually. Published February 2024.