Your guide to fast-tracking your career

Find out how to
- Take your career to the next level
- Avoid the career planning pitfalls
- Make the most of your performance and salary reviews
- Gain career-boosting qualifications

Life-changing Learning
Seize the day

By downloading this guide you have already taken the first step towards a better, more satisfying career. Making the decision to strive for the career you know you deserve can be a liberating moment, and this guide is designed to show you the various pathways through which success and satisfaction can be achieved.

Whether you’re looking for a total change, or simply for a quick boost, this guide is full of tips, tricks and useable advice provided by the professional careers advisers from The Open University’s Careers Advisory Service that will help you jump-start your career.

So seize the day, delve in and get started!

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Avoid the career planning pitfalls

These days we very rarely stay in the same job for our entire working lives. This makes career planning essential, but even the best laid plans can be disrupted. Here are the top ten career planning mistakes to avoid:

1. **Not having a plan**
   Knowing what you want and having an idea of how you are going to get there is key to your success, it sounds simple but often this is the first hurdle to overcome. By investing time to work out your overall aim, a set of goals, a plan of action and a rough timescale, you are planning to succeed.

2. **Not doing your research**
   You wouldn’t buy a house or go on holiday without doing your research, so why leave your career to chance? You’ll need to thoroughly research careers and jobs, especially if you are looking to change career direction. You’ll also need to research the local labour market to determine what is available and what organisations may be developing locally in the future.

3. **Not taking time to reflect on yourself**
   Take some time to assess yourself, review your life and work experience and the skills and qualities that have grown out of them. This kind of self-knowledge is the best basis for making decisions about your career. Remember you may have potential that is yet to be developed, so make sure you keep an open mind when considering what the future holds.

4. **Not staying positive**
   Easier said than done sometimes, you should know that earning your dream job will be a challenge, but one that is worth it in the end. Don’t get downhearted and make sure you frequently review what you are doing. For instance, if you are getting lots of rejections from job applications, then look at what you can change. Are your spending enough time tailoring your cover letter and adapting your CV for each job?

5. **Not growing your own role**
   It’s easy to get stuck in your daily routine at work without looking at what other projects or pieces of work you could get involved in. Explore the possibilities of growing your existing role into what you want it to be. Don’t be afraid of discussing this with your manager.
Staying in an unfulfilling job too long
An extremely easy trap to fall into, as the security of a current job, no matter how unfulfilling, can be preferable to taking the decision to leave and find another role. While not a decision to take lightly, with proper research, planning and faith in yourself, you can put yourself in the driving seat of your career to make sure you get where you want to be.

Forgetting about social media
Many employers now check your social media profiles as a way of working out what kind of employee you are. This means that you should be projecting a professional image, at least on the part of your profile visible to the public. Check your privacy settings to make sure no one else can view your profile other than your friends. As odd as it sounds, a social media profile could be the difference that loses (or gains) that new job, or promotion.

Not being open to working flexibly
It may take time and effort to get the exact role you want, but if you are flexible, you are more likely to get a foot in the door. For instance applying for a part-time role and hoping for more hours. Or, if you want to work in a particular industry or for a particular organisation, it may be worth trying to get a more junior role than the one you ultimately want. This could help you build up a network of contacts as well as prove your worth.

Having a one track mind
So you’ve got a plan and idea of where you want to be, but things do change. In the ever-evolving job market, careers come and go. As emerging technology creates new and exciting jobs, make sure you keep your finger on the pulse and are agile enough to be able to review your plan in light of these.

Not following your dream
The path of least resistance can be an attractive proposition. But remember: you’re the author of your own life story. If you have a dream or an ambition for your career, it’s down to you to set the wheels in motion to make it happen.
What employers are really looking for

Identifying what your manager or director is looking for is crucial to your success. As well as asking “what can they do for me”, ask yourself “what can I do for them, what can I offer the organisation and why should they give me what I want?”

In a recent survey, we asked employers what they really look for from their employees and how they want their employees to help their organisation. Their answers might surprise you...

Top ten things you can do that make employers more likely to offer a pay rise or promotion

1. Gain qualifications, through additional education, that help you become better at your job
2. Go on work-related training courses
3. Gain work-related knowledge through free online courses or by reading relevant books and/or articles
4. Always meet deadlines
5. Meet your targets
6. Be eager to gain new job skills
7. Work more efficiently
8. Be a team player
9. Win the company new business
10. Work as hard as possible to make things easy for your supervisor/manager

Top ten qualities employers look for in their staff

1. Honesty
2. Self-motivation
3. The right experience
4. Keen to expand their skill set
5. Has the right qualifications
6. A positive attitude
7. Hardworking
8. Takes the initiative
9. Dependability
10. Intelligence
An expert’s view

Ellen Cocking, Deputy Head, Careers Advisory Services at The Open University, provides her advice on how to develop your career.

“There’s never a best time to become more active about developing your career or deciding to have a change in direction; we all lead busy lives! Whatever your constraints, there is always potential for change. The more proactive you are, the more you develop your networks and make suggestions in your workplace, the greater the range of opportunities likely to become open to you. So: act now and develop your networks.”

“The key to your success, whatever your aim, is how well you know yourself. If you don’t recognise your strengths how can you sell them to someone else? Here are my suggestions on how to do this:

It can be really enlightening to ask others in your network what they think of you; they will often identify aspects of your behaviour that you take for granted but which could provide you with an additional selling point.

Step back and simply think: how have you dealt with challenges, what went well and what didn’t, what have you learned? Do this every couple of months, it’s crucial to write some notes because, however much you think you’ll remember, you’ll forget some details.”

The Open University Careers Website contains sections to help you develop both your networks and your self-awareness

Click www.openuniversity.co.uk/features
What employers say:

“You just can’t beat real enthusiasm, but on its own this isn’t always enough. If you can add the right expertise and skills, you’ll have a great combination to put you on a successful career path. That’s why we always sit up and take notice of people who are committed to gaining work-related qualifications through additional education. Not only does this show their enthusiasm, but what they learn is often of immediate value in the office.”

ASHLEY HEVER, TALENT ACQUISITION MANAGER UK & IRELAND, AT ENTERPRISE-RENT-A-CAR, A CAR RENTAL COMPANY WITH OPERATIONS WORLDWIDE.

“Having a five year plan keeps you motivated to gain the experience you need to progress. People who look to develop broad skill-sets are often those who are the most successful, and to make it towards the top, you should be looking to be strong in all areas of the business. Take things into your own hands – being a self-starter who looks to make change happen is a great way of getting noticed.”

GABBY MALLETT, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, AT THE NATIONAL ENERGY FOUNDATION, AN INDEPENDENT AND NATIONWIDE CHARITY, SPECIALISED IN IMPROVING ENERGY EFFICIENCY IN BUILDINGS.

“I look for a candidate who takes ownership of a situation, as accountability always links to quality results. The best advice I can offer is to build a strong and varied network of contacts, as this will not only help you make a name for yourself but has the potential to open up many new opportunities.”

MARK CUNNINGHAM, GROUP OPERATIONS DIRECTOR, AT THE MBA GROUP, A DIRECT MARKETING SERVICES AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT FIRM.
Top 10 quick tips for getting ahead at work

These might seem simple, but it is important to get the basics right first of all. Here are ten things you can do which can have an almost instant impact on your career.

1. **Have solutions not problems**
   If there’s a problem, try to work out a strong solution before you flag it up. This will show you as capable and proactive.

2. **Look the part**
   Make an effort with your appearance and take note of what other people are wearing, especially those above you.

3. **Share your ideas**
   If you have a good idea, get other people involved. This will show you not only have good ideas but you can also work as part of a team.

4. **Be social**
   Make an effort to chat to people at the coffee machine, and don’t fall into the trap of relying on email for communication. Go to speak to the person directly or pick up the phone!

5. **Build the right social media presence**
   Social media can be a great way to build connections and it’s a good idea to make sure your profiles are optimised for potential employer research.

6. **Make full use of the network you have**
   Most people have a network of contacts, for instance people you have worked with previously, but lots also don’t make full use of it. Simply staying in touch with the network you have, and looking to grow it where possible, can open up doors for you later on.

7. **Be a leader**
   When the opportunity arises, be positive, step up to the plate, don’t be invisible. Become the person people turn to in a crisis. Make yourself invaluable.

8. **See what’s working for others**
   Find someone who’s getting the right recognition, and see what you can learn.

9. **PR yourself**
   Simply sharing your successes with colleagues and managers can go a long way. Also be quick to praise the work of others and they will be more likely to return the favour. An endorsement from someone else is the best way of having your accomplishments recognised.

10. **Boost your skills**
    Recognise what additional skills, knowledge or qualifications you need to take your career to the next level and investigate what options are available to help you obtain them.
Advice on performance reviews

Performance reviews are the best time of year to be upfront about your wish for a pay rise or promotion. Many people however don’t properly prepare, allowing the opportunity to go missing. Follow these simple steps:

1. **Know your role**
   It sounds simple, but go back to your original job description and make sure you understand your role fully. You may find you’re already doing much more than expected and it’s useful to know this going into a negotiation.

2. **Be active**
   The review isn’t just an opportunity for you to hear how you’re doing, it’s a chance to highlight your achievements, make suggestions, offer solution to problems, voice concerns and assert what you want. Make it a conversation and if you don’t get the level of feedback you want, make sure you ask for it!

3. **Ensure you negotiate targets that are realistic and relevant**
   This is vital as otherwise, you might be evaluated unfairly in your next review. Meeting clear targets is an extremely strong way of showing your development.

4. **Take notes**
   During performance reviews there are often actions that need following up, so make notes throughout, ensuring no key points are missed.

5. **Ask for training or support in gaining qualifications**
   This shows how serious you are about progressing your career. This may be internal, or through an external provider such as a college or university.
Negotiating a pay rise can be one of the most nerve-wracking experiences in working life, but it doesn’t have to be. Just follow our steps below. After all, if you don’t ask, you don’t get!

**Build a business case**

Don’t be afraid to blow your own trumpet. Have documents ready highlighting your achievements, especially all the additional activities you’ve been involved in and how you’ve gone above and beyond the expected call of duty. The bottom line is: show them how valuable you are.

**Know your current value**

Gather the right data so that you know the going rate for your skill set and see where you sit alongside this benchmark. With facts and figures on your side, such as national averages, it will make it easier to negotiate a pay increase if you fall below the average.

**Be prepared to negotiate**

Lots of companies offer a rigid threshold structure of pay rises. This means you may only be able to have your salary increased by a fixed amount. Even so, it is worth negotiating to ensure you have the best deal possible.

**Discuss more than money**

It’s not all about salary, some businesses are able and willing to offer additional benefits such as a company car, increased holiday or bonuses. Play your cards right and you may be better off than if you had a pay rise.

**Take your time**

Don’t let yourself be pressured into immediately taking an offer you are not happy with. If this means taking a few days to think about it, do so.
Top tips on finding job opportunities

1. Apply for “hidden jobs”
   It is estimated that seven out of 10 jobs are never advertised and for some sectors this can be even higher. This creates a huge opportunity to apply for jobs without competing against scores of other people. Identify the sectors and companies you want to work in, and use the internet to find contact details.

2. Make speculative approaches
   The effective job-seeker must tap the hidden market by making speculative approaches to prospective employers. This could be through an initial phone call or via email with a CV and cover letter. While daunting, this can be one of the most effective ways of securing a new position. Before you send, make sure you check to see if the company in question has a policy against speculative applications and refrain from applying if they do.

3. Use and develop your network
   Networking is a fundamental business skill but is also a really effective way of putting yourself out there to ensure you are at the right place at the right time.

4. Apply for advertised jobs
   Analyse the advert closely to really understand what the organisation is looking for, then follow the instructions carefully to avoid your application being rejected for simple mistakes. If you need more information, show initiative by calling or emailing to ask for it.

5. Contact recruiters
   Recruitment specialists or agencies are free to job-seekers and many specialise in certain industries. They can also offer excellent advice on what you need to do to secure the position you want.

For advice on finding the right job opportunity for you, go to The Open University Careers website: www.openuniversity.co.uk/jobseeking
Top tips on applying for jobs

1. Be discerning
   Is this the job you want? Do you have the skills and experience to have a good chance of success? Making sure the job you are applying for is a match means you are using your time in the most effective way.

2. Do your research
   As well as the information in the application pack or advert, do additional research to make sure you understand the organisation and its ethos.

3. Choose your words carefully
   Always use active language, and always be positive and enthusiastic.

4. Sell yourself
   Think carefully about what makes you a unique proposition in terms of your experience and what you have to offer for the specific role in that particular company. Make sure this comes across in your application, but by showing what you can do through examples and evidence, rather than just making assertions.

5. Check your application thoroughly
   Proofread for spelling and grammatical errors as even the smallest mistake could cost you. Ask someone else to check it for you, or at least give yourself a day’s break before doing the final read through.
Top tips for CVs and cover letters

1: Get the basics right
CVs usually contain personal data, experience, education, training, interests, additional skills, career aims and references. Make sure your contact details are correct and up-to-date!

2: Analyse the job description
Think really carefully about what they are looking for and make sure you know how you are going to meet this.

3: Make sure your CV and cover letter are tailored
This gives you the best chance of success. Employers will be able to tell if you haven’t related your CV and cover letter to the job in question, and this will decrease your chances.

4: Be concise
Keep your CV and cover letter to the point, highlighting the most important parts that relate to the job at hand as early as possible. A maximum of two pages is usually right for most jobs.

5: Make sure your CV is visually effective
This means making it easy to read and follow, as well as pleasant to look at. This will make the recipient’s job easier, meaning they are more likely to continue reading.

6: Seek a second opinion
Ask someone to proofread and sense check your CV and cover letter.

7: Avoid jargon
Clichés and jargon are a turn off for employers. Keep language simple and direct.

CVs are Curriculum Vitae - a summary of academic and employment history. They may be called something else in your country.

Find more information on CVs, go to our careers website:
Click www.openuniversity.co.uk/applying
Boost your career with a qualification from The Open University

Developing new skills and knowledge and getting the qualifications you need is key to getting the job you want. Yet many people are concerned about how they could fit study around their busy work and family lives.

A qualification from The Open University on your CV shows more than your level of knowledge about a subject. It demonstrates to employers that you’re someone who is up for a challenge and committed to successfully seeing it through, with excellent time management and prioritising skills. Just the kind of person, in fact, that employers are looking for.

Our unique approach to learning sets us apart from other universities and means you don’t have to put your life on hold to get the qualification you want. Whether you choose to study with us full-time or part-time, from home or work or even on the move, you can access study materials, get in touch with fellow students and contact your tutor to get the support you need.

Here’s how we can help:

- A part-time qualification can fit around a full-time job – in fact over 70% of our students balance study with a career. With The Open University, you truly can earn while you learn.
- We believe it doesn’t matter where you start from – it’s where you want to be and how committed you are to getting there. The grades you got at school aren’t the only thing that counts, which is why our undergraduate programme is open entry and why your work experience might even count towards your degree.
- You can study at home, at work or on the move. It really is up to you where and when you study and how you fit it into your lifestyle.
- Help is always on hand while you are studying and you’re never on your own with tutor support and access to the UK’s largest vibrant student community.

The Open University has its own Careers Advisory Service which is available to all OU students. The service helps support your study choices as well as helping you to plan, develop or change your career as well as helping you with job applications and interviews.

Working out how you’ll pay for it is a big part of deciding to study. We work hard to keep the cost of study as low as possible and we can help you find a way to pay for it that suits you. We can help you apply for an OU Student Budget Account which lets you pay in monthly instalments. We can even help you approach your employer for sponsorship. So talk to us. You’ve got options.

Nearly two thirds (65%) of Open University students achieve their goal of progressing in their careers after six months. Read some of their stories by visiting www.openuniversity.co.uk/stories

An Open University degree has the same status as one from any top UK university, but recognition outside of the UK may differ. Please see our Recognition of The Open University Qualifications outside the UK leaflet for more information.
I did the usual GCSEs at school and achieved 10 from A to C. I thought I had a bit of potential and went on to do A levels at college – English literature and language, maths and art. Well, I didn’t turn up for many of the classes in art, maths didn’t work out and I managed to get a D in English – I think I picked all the wrong subjects. So I preferred to focus on working and worked full-time instead and the education ‘thing’ fizzled out.

“I always felt I had the potential to do a degree and wanted to get into programming. I was working in an IT related role at the time and thought about a Microsoft qualification but I always ended up looking towards The Open University which seemed to fit better around what I wanted to do, which was study and keep working. Also, a Microsoft qualification would become out of date and an Open University degree would be with me for life. My wife had a degree and was doing well in her job with it and achieving a lot. I thought I had better keep up with her.”

“I applied for a job as a software developer but the company couldn’t take me on because I didn’t have a degree. My parents then paid for me to do the first two units with The Open University and so I applied again, told them I was doing a degree and I was getting good marks.”

“They said okay, we will take you on and later there was a conversation about them paying for a qualification in computer language, but I pestered them until they agreed to fund the whole degree. They were very helpful giving time off for exams and helped me when I had questions about my course that was related to something someone was doing at work.”

“Even while studying, my career was progressing faster. I was picking things up on the course I could use at work. The company was quite small and I was looking into areas where I could use, documentation rather than a ‘written on the back of a fag packet’ way of doing things.”

“The Open University has been one of the best experiences of my life. Some of us might not choose the right path at age 16 or 17, it’s difficult to choose what you want to learn for the next few years without trying it first. You take a few jobs and decide to work rather than learn, giving you time to find out what really interests you.”

“Some people might think it is too late to get a degree but The Open University is there to correct mistakes you might have made in life.”
Did you know your employer could sponsor your education?

Employers really value further study, not only for the opportunities it offers their staff, but for the business benefits it brings them. Why not consider approaching them to sponsor you and fund some or all of the cost of your study. A little help can go a long way!

Here’s our top tips on securing sponsorship:

1. **Make a business case**
   A work-related qualification helps make you better at your job and makes you a more effective member of the team. You will also bring new skills to the workforce, potentially expanding the scope of what your organisation can achieve. Make sure you show your employer the benefits to them, not just to yourself.

2. **Demonstrate the immediate benefits**
   Open University modules draw on real workplace situations and are results-driven so your new skills and knowledge can start benefiting your employer immediately, ensuring a good return on their investment.

3. **Fill the gap**
   A qualification is a great way to learn new skills that help to expand your role within the organisation. Many Open University modules are designed by leading public and private sector industry experts and in conjunction with sector skills councils, professional bodies and employers. They draw on workplace practices and real-world sector insight to ensure each one delivers against your employer’s goals.

4. **Minimised downtime and flexible working**
   Your employer may be concerned about your study taking you away from the workplace. It is important to reassure them that this needn’t be the case with a flexible study programme that minimises downtime and fits around your existing role.

5. **Make a commitment**
   If your employer is to support you financially, reassure them that you will pay them back with a commitment to stay put. This will show them that the training is part of a long term plan with the company.

6. **All, some, a little**
   If your employer is reluctant, why not try to negotiate. They don’t have to finance the whole qualification; they could share the cost with you. In fact, neither you nor your employer have to commit to pay for the whole qualification from the outset, you could start with just one module and see the difference it makes. Sponsorship can also be combined with our monthly pay-as-you-go payment option, or even debit or credit card payment, so there are lots of options for you.

If you need help approaching your employer for sponsorship, why not let us help you?

Call +44 300 303 0266

to find out how
Find out more about The Open University

Life-changing Learning
No-one understands how to help students succeed and make knowledge stick better than us – we’re the leading expert in flexible higher education. To do what we do successfully, year after year, requires exceptional technology, methods and staff. The way we work, works – not least because it’s flexible enough to work around you and your life. We help all types of ordinary people achieve extraordinary things and we are with them every step of the way.

Try free course material
Why not visit our Openlearn website and try something for free. Choose from thousands of hours of course materials in hundreds of different subjects.
Visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/learn4free
Employment law and recruitment practices differ between countries. It is important to understand the recruitment practices in both your country and your chosen occupation or profession.

Our Careers Advisory Service
For a wealth of advice on all aspects of your career planning, visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/careers-service