

A professional development plan is a relatively simple document that records a lawyer's goals, how the goals will be attained (including the activities, resources, and support needed and how they will be obtained), and a timetable. Firms that ask lawyers to prepare professional development plans can make the process easier by providing guidelines, instructions, a means for obtaining baseline development data, and explanations of any categories in which goals should be set. Page 3 shows a simple template for a professional development plan.

Guidelines

When asking lawyers to set goals and create professional development plans, it is important to provide context, definitions, and instructions. Specific subjects for guidelines include:

Statement of Purpose: Explain (a) why the firm wants lawyers to prepare development plans, (b) how the plans are to be used, (c) how the plans will benefit the lawyer and/or the firm, and (d) what impact, if any, the plans will have on a lawyer's advancement or compensation.

Process: Provide information and directions for creating the plan, e.g., whether the plan must be reviewed or approved (and if so, by whom), how many goals should be set (per category and how many in all), the applicable time frame for completing a draft of the plan, the period to be covered by the plan, and if appropriate, to whom the plan should be submitted.

How to identify and set goals: Many lawyers lack the information they need to determine what kinds of goals would be suitable for them at their level of experience. Help them by identifying sources of useful information, e.g., written performance standards, practice group benchmarks, informal feedback, performance evaluations. (For guidance, see Issue 6, Spring 2004, of *Management Solutions* at www.idaabbott.com, which discussed how to set development goals.) In addition, explain the difference between long-term career goals and the shorter-term performance goals that will lead toward career goals. Most lawyers' development plans focus on performance goals that can be achieved within 6 months to a year. It is helpful to consider these goals within the context of the lawyers' longer-term career goals and aspirations.

Role of Advisor/Mentor: If another person (e.g., advisor, mentor, practice group leader) will be involved in reviewing, approving, supporting, or monitoring the plan, explain the role of that person (including specific tasks and responsibilities) and the steps to be followed.

Professional Development Baseline

A baseline of the lawyer's experience and development status is useful when deciding on suitable goals. Information that helps establish the baseline includes:

- Experience over the previous period
- Feedback from supervisors, peers, and clients about the lawyer's (a) strengths, and (b) development needs
- Information and recommendations derived from performance evaluations
- The lawyer's own observations and desired experience
- Past and current involvement in development activities (e.g., firm committees, client contact)

Categories of Goals

Some firms prescribe the categories in which lawyers are expected to set goals, while others recommend categories or leave it up to the lawyer entirely. It is helpful to identify at least a few categories in which lawyers should set goals (e.g., substantive legal knowledge, business and management skills, client development, commitment to the community, firm citizenship). This is especially important for junior associates whose knowledge of law practice and development expectations may be limited. For each category you list, define what the category means, explain why the firm deems it important and describe the kinds of goals that might be included, providing concrete examples.

Development plans should be limited to relatively few goals, although the exact number of goals that is reasonable will vary depending on the lawyer's needs, ambitions, and experience level, as well as the firm's recommendations and expectations. While it is a good idea for lawyers to challenge themselves in creating their development plans, those who seem to be overly ambitious should be encouraged to prioritize their goals so that at least the most important ones are likely to be achieved.

Development Plan: Action Items

To help lawyers create a written plan, utilize a personal worksheet or plan form that presents questions to be answered. Questions for each goal may include the following:

- What steps and actions will the lawyer take to achieve the goal?
- What kinds of resources (including, e.g., work experience, personal contacts, assistance from others, training) will the lawyer need?
- Which of the necessary resources are available to the lawyer in the firm?
- Where and how can the lawyer obtain any desired resources that are not available?
- Who will provide ongoing resources and support?
- How much time will be required to achieve the goal?
- What can the firm do to help the lawyer achieve the goal?

The answers to these questions should generate the final plan, which should be straightforward.

That plan should list *for each stated goal*:

- Specific action steps
- Resources, including those that are available and those that are needed
- Timeline for accomplishing each step and overall goal

Name: _____

Practice Group: _____

Advisor/Mentor: _____

Time period covered: _____

INSTRUCTIONS (E.g., purpose, how to complete form, where to submit form)

CATEGORIES OF GOALS (If goals are to be set in specific categories, define and illustrate those categories.)

ACTION PLAN

GOAL CATEGORY A:

Goal 1: (Identify the goal) _____
Steps to be taken: _____ Resources: _____ Timeline: _____

Goal 2: _____
Steps to be taken: _____ Resources: _____ Timeline: _____

GOAL CATEGORY B:

Goal 1: _____
Steps to be taken: _____ Resources: _____ Timeline: _____

Goal 2: _____
Steps to be taken _____ Resources _____ Timeline: _____

Lawyer: _____ Date: _____

Advisor/Mentor: _____ Date: _____