

Road Map for Success

A Personal Business Plan Provides Direction and Focus to Help You Reach Professional Goals

Last month, we focused on overcoming mental obstacles to business development. Hopefully, you have already taken a few steps toward marketing success. Now it's time to take the next one: developing a personal business plan. Of course, many of you may work in firms that don't even have a plan for the firm as a whole, let alone your practice group or individual attorneys. And some of you are not privy to the firm's plan, even if there is one. Even so, that's no reason to forgo developing a plan for yourself. Remember, if you don't plan your career, someone else will plan it for you.

Have no fear: Personal business planning is not about writing a 50-page manifesto outlining every detail of every day of your professional life for the next 10 years. In fact, personal business planning can be as simple as you want to make it. You don't even have to call it a business plan—call it a career plan, if you prefer.

No matter how simple you make it or what you call it, personal business planning is about taking inventory of where you are, determining where you want to go, and building a road map for getting there. Once you have the plan in writing, all you have to do is revisit it periodically to check your course and make any necessary adjustments.

Still skeptical about the usefulness of personal business planning? Consider the following advantages:

- It allows you to chart a career course that matches your specific skills, abilities, and interests.

- It can help you to align your own goals with those of your firm.
- It becomes easier for you to review and revisit your goals on a regular basis, making sure that you do not stray too far off course.
- Because it can take years to develop legal business, a business plan focuses you on what you need to do now to ensure that you'll have business down the road.
- It will help you and your firm focus time and resources on those opportunities that offer the greatest chances for success.
- It can help you stay focused, even when you're bombarded with new ideas and opportunities. When a vast array of possibilities present themselves, your plan can serve as a personal constitution that forces you to make a careful analysis before making amendments or changing course.
- Finally, a properly written plan will help you measure and recognize the results of your efforts over time.

GETTING THERE FROM HERE

Here are some simple steps you can take to build your own personal business plan:

1. Take an inventory of where you are.

The first step in the personal business planning process is to survey your current situation. Often, it helps to ask yourself a series of tough questions. What are your strengths and weaknesses? What practice areas and professional activities most interest you? What is the status of your network and your reputation? How does your personal situation compare with external factors such as your firm's goals and objectives? Are your goals in line with the objectives of your firm? What about the status of your competition, both internally and externally? Are you looking to succeed in a field packed with attorneys having similar skills and goals? What are the trends taking shape in your geographic region, in your practice area, and in your clients' industries? Do your goals and objectives capitalize on these trends? Given this analysis, what threats do you need to avoid and what new opportunities can you capitalize on?

2. Determine where you want to go.

Now you know where you are, but where do you want to go? Think about creating a mission statement for yourself. I know it

sounds corny, but the mere exercise of trying to come up with one is enlightening. Answer this question: Why am I practicing law and what do I want to achieve? The answer doesn't have to be unique or earth shattering—it just has to answer the question.

Your mission statement doesn't have to be long or particularly eloquent. In fact, you should try to keep it to one sentence. The most important thing to remember is that whether you want to become a partner in your firm, help the less privileged, become a judge, move in-house, or start your own firm, your mission is yours and yours alone. Your parents were right: You can do, and be, anything you want.

3. Build a map for getting there.

All that's left now is to figure out the steps between your current situation and your destination as described in your mission statement. The best way to map out these steps is to start at the end and work your way back to your current situation. Here is how your analysis might work:

- *Establish long-term goals.* To accomplish your mission, first think about what long-term goals you will need to achieve. For example, if your mission is to become a partner, you might want to set long-term goals of winning a certain amount of new business or developing a new practice area. You might also speak with those people responsible for making partnership decisions, to hear what they want to see you accomplish in order to support the decision to make you a partner. Once you know their expectations, you can align your long-term goals with their expectations. And you can make exceeding their expectations one of your long-term goals.

If you are already a partner, your mission might be to become one of the firm's top rainmakers. To accomplish this, one of your long-term goals might be to develop a certain percentage of new business from your existing clients over the next two years.

- *Set objectives for this year.* To accomplish your long-term goals, think about what objectives you can achieve by the end of the year. To continue the above example, if your long-term goal includes developing new business, you might make it your objective to win two new clients this year that represent a certain percentage of your long-term business development goal. To develop a new practice area, you might try to work on three projects related to the new practice area. If your goal is to focus on developing new business with existing clients, your objective might be to have a certain number of face-to-face meetings with your current clients to discuss their business and legal issues.

- *Start implementing your strategies today.* Finally, to accomplish this year's objectives, think about what short-term strategies or steps you can start taking immediately. For example, to win two new

clients, you might determine that you need to build your referral network and become more visible in your practice area. That might mean taking a leadership role in an association, writing articles, and giving speeches. You might run for office in a bar association section that interests you. Or you might join Toastmasters, to hone your speaking skills. To identify writing opportunities, you could develop better relationships with key people in your firm's marketing department so that they think of you when there is a suitable writing opportunity.

To accomplish your objective of working on three projects in a new practice area, you might determine that you need guidance and additional skills. Then you could identify a mentor with experience building new practice areas. To acquire new skills, you could take continuing legal education courses or seek out opportunities to work on the types of matters that will develop those skills.

To develop additional business from existing clients, you might start by scheduling regular entertainment outings with key clients, and in the meantime educate yourself about their businesses. What's going on in their industries? What do their most recent annual reports reveal about their strategies? Who are their primary competitors? What legal needs might these clients have that your firm is not currently serving?

The key to building your road map is to make sure that each activity you plan to undertake has a clear deadline and is as specific, objective, and measurable as possible (e.g., "I will take two CLE courses in complex litigation techniques by June 1" or "I will entertain Mr. Jones from ABC Inc. once each quarter").

Also, when it comes to planning, the biggest landmines are complexity and procrastination. Try to avoid creating a plan that overwhelms you or anyone you tell about it. And remember that any plan is better than no plan at all. Strive to keep your plan simple and start taking action now.

As an attorney, you're well-versed in the areas of analysis and logic. In every work matter, you look at the current situation and connect the dots to accomplish the desired objective. Apply the same approach to personal business planning, and the dots you connect will lead you to the career you've always wanted.

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