

## How to Make Progress on Your Long-Term Career Goals



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Summary. Most of us would prefer to think long-term about our careers, rather than just veering randomly to snag perceived opportunities and avoid pitfalls. But how can you adopt a strategic lens when you might not be entirely sure where you want to end up? The... [more](#)

It's not that it's *easy* to achieve our [long-term career goals](#). But if you know what you're aspiring toward, you at least have a sense of the process: [Begin with the end in mind](#), work backward to the present day, and execute assiduously.

But for almost all of us, the last two years have scrambled the trajectories we were on. Foundational elements were upended, from how we work (the widespread shift to [remote and hybrid arrangements](#)) to geography ([11% of Americans moved](#) during the first year of the pandemic alone) to where we work (before the job market rebounded, the International Labour Organization estimated that [114 million people](#) lost their jobs in 2020). That hasn't just shifted the starting point for our career planning; in many cases, it's also

altered our understanding of what's possible and what we actually want.

For some, there's additional clarity: *I want to live near family*, or *I only want a job where I can work remotely*, or *it's time to [start my own company](#)*. But for others, the disconcerting truth is that we're [just not sure](#). Most of us would prefer to think long-term about our careers, rather than just veering randomly to snag perceived opportunities and avoid pitfalls. But how can you adopt a strategic lens when you might not be entirely sure where you want to end up? Here are four strategies I've discovered in my [research](#) that can be helpful in moving toward your long-term goals – whatever they turn out to be.

## Decide what you *don't* want

We often put an enormous amount of pressure on ourselves to know our future direction. Partly that's because humans are [hardwired to dislike uncertainty](#), and also sometimes because we fear [losing status](#) with others if it seems like we don't know what we're doing. But that pressure can lead us to prematurely decide on a course of action that may not be a fit. Instead, I advise my clients to take the opposite approach: Get clear on what you don't want, and then take steps to avoid that. It's much easier to identify things you know you dislike, rather than ideating about a hypothetical future.

For instance, you might decide you never want to work for a micromanaging boss again, or you're done with your current industry, or you no longer want to work hands-on and only want to take on advisory roles. Those are extremely useful pieces of data from which to form a more realistic picture of what you do want, by asking: *How can I make sure I avoid these things in the future?* Those decisions are likely to lead you in the direction you want to take.

## Develop provisional hypotheses

We all know it's impossible to do everything at once. And yet it's hard to resist the lure of [too many goals](#). Instead, we need to get disciplined and narrow down our focus. Elizabeth, a professional I profiled in my book [Reinventing You](#), was interested in a half-dozen possible careers. Exploring them all could have become a massive waste of time that distracted her from making genuine progress on anything. But instead, she had a methodical approach, gathering “data points” about each profession (ranging from informational interviews to reading industry analyses) in order to find reasons to rule it out (for instance, the weekend hours required in a certain profession might make it a non-starter).

That process allowed her to focus more intensively on a small number of promising avenues. Think about how you can narrow down your options (perhaps, as above, by focusing on what you don't want) and then pick one direction as your “provisional hypothesis” for where you want your career to go. You can always change your mind later, but you've made an informed choice and will be strategically working toward a plausible goal.

## Make progress on the basics

In science, “[basic research](#)” focuses on increasing our understanding of fundamental phenomena – how the brain works, or the principles of physics, for example – whereas “applied research” translates those findings into practical, real-world uses. In our careers, it's great to be practical, of course – but only if we're sure of the direction where we want to go. For many of us, the myriad of professional choices we might make leads to [decision paralysis](#) and no action at all. Obviously, stasis isn't a great career strategy.

What's far better is to focus on the professional equivalent of basic research and double down on foundational skills and knowledge that will make you better, no matter what direction you ultimately decide to pursue. Learning to code in a particular computer language may not be helpful if you decide to leave engineering – but becoming a better

public speaker or honing your time management skills are likely to be useful in almost any profession.

## Take stock of your emotional and mental energy

The past two years have been draining for everyone, but we've all been affected differently based on our circumstances (Working remotely and living alone? Constantly barraged by a spouse and kids?). One of the most important elements in thinking strategically about your career is understanding that our lives operate in cycles — I call it “thinking in waves” — and we have to recognize where we are in that process.

You may have been [languishing](#) during the pandemic, but now feel ready to shake off the torpor and dive into new projects with zeal. Or you may have spent the past two years working at the outer edges of your limits, just trying to keep everything together. If that's the case, this probably isn't the moment to go all in at work. Instead, you may need to [manage your energy](#) and recognize that the best thing you can do for your long-term career success is to take a well-deserved break, whether it's a more formal [sabbatical](#) or simply recognizing that it's OK to pause on creating ambitious new goals for yourself right now — and avoid beating yourself up for that choice.

Short-term pressures always intrude on our long-term career planning, and that's especially true when we've been through a collective period of crisis. Even if we're not entirely sure where we want to end up, by following these strategies, we can ensure we're taking the right steps to move away from what isn't working for us, and toward a future that seems more hopeful.