

Business & Careers

Not enough emphasis placed on setting goals



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The Headhunter

Business leaders and professional athletes rely on goal-setting to produce results and stay on top of their game year-after-year. While the same should apply within the legal industry, it is apparent that lawyers often fail to take full advantage of the empirically effective yet underutilized process of goal-setting, instead allowing the direction of their careers to be dictated by the immediate demands of practice.

Most lawyers would agree that having a clear vision of what they want to accomplish

and planning for success is a good idea—but the habit of setting goals tends to fade because they fail to properly set them in the first place. Here are a few common pitfalls.

Setting uninspired goals

Lawyers consistently fall short of their goals when they fail to first identify what truly inspires them. Goal-setting in the legal profession is commonly filtered through the generic path set in our profession: secure articles, get hired back, seek partnership, and then continue to grow a book of business.

But these milestones merely reflect generalized notions of success, and thus, it is unsustainable to blindly pursue them for the long-term—without adding further meaning since these goals are not inherently motivating, particularly to this current generation of lawyers. Instead, goal-setting should be drawn from your authentic interests and tied



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to a greater vision, an end you would actually be glad to struggle and fight to achieve.

Your inspired goals may very well align with your current path and trajectory, but if they don't, your progress will be stunted. Despite your competitive edge and natural talents, those who are truly passionate about the work will outperform and outlast you.

Take some time to reflect: Is it your ultimate goal to be a thought leader in your area of focus? Advocate for the marginalized? Trusted consigliere in your community? Most lawyers go into law school seeking to make some specific change in the world, but eventually allow job opportunities to take them elsewhere. This is good and fine as our values tend to be broadly applicable, and our profession is thankfully a dynamic one—but when someone drifts too far away from their inherent motivations, they will be left feeling unfulfilled. Accordingly, if you are not clear about your true inspirations, your first goal should be to confirm them, so that you can crystallize your career vision.

This is not easy work, which is why lawyers tend to neglect introspection, but if you are hitting a wall in your career, consider seeking support from professional career coaches or trusted mentors.

They weren't SMART

Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound, that is. Management professionals often rely on this mnemonic acronym to encourage effective goal-setting.

Keep your goals "specific" and unambiguous. Can you "measure" your progress as you work toward your goals? Goals must be "achievable"; if you don't reasonably expect to accomplish them, you will not truly strive towards them. Are the actions you plan to take "relevant" to accomplishing your goals? And be sure that your goals are "time-bound" to ensure they do not languish.

Lawyers regularly state lofty goals but fail to set day-to-day action items to pursue them. As the saying goes, "a goal without a plan is just a wish," and the SMART factors are crucial for this planning process.

For example, a common long-term goal in firm environments is to become a rain-maker. Most lawyers build their book of business through their network of referrals, so a SMART goal to work towards that bigger picture may be to attend a networking event every quarter of the year and to bring back at least 10 business cards from each function. While this goal may not yield immediate results, it demonstrates a stra-

tegic approach with clear and measurable goals that builds toward the lawyer's ultimate objectives.

Lack of accountability

As lawyers often strive to succeed on their own merits, they rarely seek accountability in their goal-setting. Research by Dr. Gail Matthews at Dominican University suggests, however, that accountability is one of the most effective tools for goal accomplishment. The study (see here for more information: www.dominican.edu/academics/ahss/undergraduate-programs/psych/faculty/fulltime/gailmatthews/researchsummary2.pdf), which included 267 participants, found that individuals who wrote down their goals, shared them with a friend, and sent a weekly progress report, were nearly twice as likely to accomplish their goals than participants who merely thought about them.

Even the group that simply wrote down their goals noticed a significant impact compared to the control group. It may feel awkward at first, but try to find a trusted friend, family member or colleague to keep you accountable to your goals, or consider hiring someone.

My view is that accountability is one of the main values a personal trainer or business coach adds to the table since most of us know how to move towards our objectives, but fail in our perseverance.

When I first started out as a recruiter a number of years ago, I had a list of lofty goals related to business development objectives and new skills I wanted to learn. A good friend, who was then an up-and-coming investment advisor, also had similar goals, so we formed a pact to call each other every Wednesday morning to go over our weekly goals and accomplishments. We would then meet quarterly to discuss our progress and refine our goals. I found having an accountability partner to be an incredibly effective tool. As I started each week, I knew I would be calling my friend to inform him of my progress, or lack thereof, which regularly prompted me into action.

As we approach the New Year, consider whether you are setting the right goals and if you have the accountability in place to accomplish them.

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ANNOUNCEMENT



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