



Backwards Planning: A Great Strategy for Those Who Find It Hard to Get Started

Research consistently shows that a well-conceived plan can improve your odds for achieving your goals. So why don't more people do it in their personal lives? There are three common pitfalls:

- We don't know what we don't know – our goals are too vague
- We get caught up in the day-to-day details and don't invest the reflective time to make a plan
- Without support, we lack confidence in our aspirations

Planning and timelines are essential in the workplace. Whether for students or adults, the question is "How can I improve my efforts for my personal goals and aspirations – particularly when they are education or career-related?" The answer is: **Backwards Planning, beginning with the end in mind.**

1. Define Your Goal.

- a. What do you want to accomplish?
- b. Define your goal as specifically as possible. Ask yourself why it is important and is it realistic.

2. Identify the steps and sequence needed to achieve your goals.

- a. Write out a random list of all the steps and resources that you need to accomplish your goal.
- b. Estimate the time and resources (money and people) you need to complete each step on the list.
- c. Group the random steps into clusters and sequence them. You might find it fun to use self-stick notes on a tabletop or wall for this activity, writing one step on each note. Then you can easily move them into clusters. Finally, think about creating a starting outline to begin the sequencing.

3. Create a deadline-driven timeline by committing your plan to paper and calendar by assigning specific due dates to each major goal and supporting steps. It is much easier to create your calendar by working backwards – keeping the end in mind.

- a. Identify the date by which your goal should be completed.



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- b. Identify the last step you must do before the goal's due date.
- c. Identify the next to the last step; the third to the last, and continue until you finish putting all the steps in reverse order. You may need to move things around a bit until you finalize the plan.

4. **Seek support.**

- a. Get some feedback or input from someone to make sure you aren't overlooking something critical.
- b. Check to see if identified resources are available.
- c. Backwards planning can give you confidence as you move forward toward achieving your goal.

An Example of Backwards Planning for College-Bound Students

For high school students, the end is not what college to attend – but identifying a career direction (or a few careers) that align best with their unique abilities and interests. Once the possible careers are identified, the students can see which academic majors will prepare them best for those paths. They can use these majors as important criteria for evaluating potential college matches for themselves. With this knowledge, they can also select courses at the high school level that are in line with their career direction, such as a computer drafting course for a future engineer or a child development course for a future teacher. They can even gain experience working a summer or part-time job related to their future career field. Students who know their career direction (or a few they are considering) make more informed decisions while still in high school and can explore career interest areas in a more focused way.

Backwards Planning for Adult Career Changers

For adults, this technique can help identify their job or career goal and organize the necessary steps, working backward, to accomplish it. For instance, before getting hired for the desired position, they might have to, in reverse order,

- 7 - complete an internship,
- 6 - take the required courses at a university or community college,
- 5 - get accepted into the program,
- 4 - apply to schools,
- 3 - research schools that have the academic program desired,



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2 - job shadow a few individuals working in the desired job, and

1 - conduct informational interviews with people working in the desired job or career field.

Many individuals benefit from the guidance of a professional career consultant to help put these kinds of plans together, and their encouragement when obstacles are encountered along the way.

In all cases, research shows that great career decisions and solid plans come to fruition faster with the same first step: a comprehensive career assessment that includes aptitudes and interests, with career recommendations that are a best fit.