Skills Guide

Career Conversations for Individuals

Our lives are full of competing demands and personal career review often goes to the end of the to do list. This skills guide is written for professional services staff who want to pause in order to consider career options. It may also be helpful to research staff.

You may be thinking that you need to start your career planning afresh. If this is the case, try the Oxford Careers Compass from the University’s Careers Service, or search for the Taking charge of your career course on Lynda.com.

Not everyone needs or wants to do a complete career rethink. You might, for example:

- Have a specific job in mind and want some guidance on how to achieve it
- Be scanning vacancies and anxious about making a mistake
- Need some help with a job application or an interview

Whatever your reason, you may find it helpful to ask for input from someone else. This guide will help you plan for and have a conversation with that other person.

How and with whom?

Here are some options:

1. Your PDR is an obvious place to start. Everyone is entitled to a Personal Development Review (or a Career Development Review in some divisions) and these conversations have very clear prompts on career aspirations. Your PDR will be with your line manager or supervisor or another senior colleague and you will be able to ask for your reviewer’s advice, based on their experience
2. A trusted critical friend who would be willing to talk the issue through with you
3. A mentor, either as part of a formal mentoring scheme or an informal request that you make to someone who you think could help you and might be willing to talk with you. There is nothing to stop you approaching any colleague who you think would be a good mentor for you and asking them if they could make some time to meet with you. Make sure you are clear about what you are looking for and don’t be put off if they say no. Try someone else
4. A careers support mentor, who will be an experienced recruiter in the University and who volunteers to support and professional services staff with application writing and interview skills

What you can expect

Remember that none of these people are likely to be career guidance specialists, so it’s important not to go into a conversation expecting a career counselling session. Remember that if you are an Oxford graduate or a postdoc, you can access the University’s Careers Service. You may also be entitled to use the Careers Service at your own university – check on their website.

Planning a career conversation

Whoever you are talking to will find it easier to help you if you do some thinking and planning beforehand. Here are some tips:

- What’s your aim in asking for a career conversation? Are you asking for advice on how to make specific move, for example, or have you got a particular job in mind and you’re not sure whether it will take you in the direction you’re looking for? Maybe you just feel stuck

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and don’t know what your options might be. Or you know that your interview skills are holding you back and you need some help to improve. Start by working out what you want to ask for and write it down as a short statement to use when you start the conversation

- What kind of help do you want? Do you want advice? Or information? Or help to think through your options? Decide what you are looking for and tell your critical friend/mentor/reviewer so that they can prepare

- If you have a particular job or type of job in mind, bring any job descriptions and selection criteria that you have for the post(s) to the conversation so that you are both talking about actual jobs rather than speculating

- If you don’t have a job in mind, and you would like to talk about what options you might have, start scanning jobs boards and vacancies for jobs that appeal and collect job descriptions and selection criteria for any that interest you. Look at the gaps between your current CV and what these jobs require and see where the gaps are. All of these preparations will help your manager/mentor/supervisor to focus the conversation on what matters to you

In the conversation

- Send your critical friend/reviewer/mentor any relevant information (e.g. CVs or job adverts) before the meeting and make sure you take copies with you

- Have a clear topic for discussion and share this with the other person at the start of the conversation

- Make notes during the discussion so that you don’t forget anything useful

- Be prepared for the fact that you’re unlikely to be given ready-made answers that give you a clear and direct path to your perfect job. Your career is yours to shape and your responsibility. It’s also worth remembering that recruiters look for people who are proactive and self-directed. Taking charge of your own career planning and review is a great way to demonstrate to an employer that you have those attributes

- If you are asking a PDR reviewer about an internal promotion within your team, remember that their options may be limited. You may have to wait for someone to leave before suitable job becomes vacant. There may be budget or headcount or work design reasons why a new post or a regrade isn’t possible and you may be encouraged to think about lateral moves

- Be open to suggestions that may sound surprising or left-field and don’t write anything off until you have considered it. It’s easy to become set in your thinking and to miss a creative opportunity that would take you forward

After the conversation

- Take some time to reflect on the discussion and consider each option generated against your goals. Which is most likely to lead towards what you seek?

- Make your plan and commit to starting on it. What will you do first?

- If you believe that another conversation would be helpful, ask your critical friend/reviewer/mentor if they would meet you again

- Keep them in touch with your progress

- Be persistent. People who have successful careers will often tell you that they had to be determined, prepared to wait and willing to consider options in order to succeed