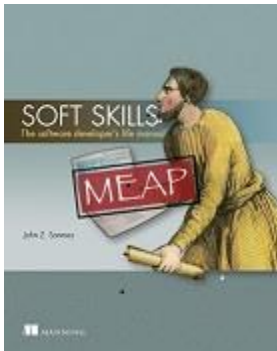


Thinking about the future: What are your goals?

By John Z. Sonmez, [Soft Skills: The software developer's life manual](#)



When it comes to career, most people don't give enough thought to what to focus on and, as a result, their steps lack purpose or direction. This article, excerpted from [Soft Skills: The software developer's life manual](#) by John Sonmez, talks about how to set goals and track them.

Now that you're thinking about your software development career as a business, it's time to start defining the goals you have for this business.

Not everyone is alike. You might have a very different set of goals for your career than I do, but if you're ever going to achieve any of those goals, you have to know what they are. This is, of course, easier said than done. I've found that most people, software developers included, drift through life without really having a concrete realization of what their goals are or what they're trying to accomplish in life. This is the natural state of most human beings. We don't tend to really give enough thought to what to focus on and as a result our steps lack purpose or direction.

Think about sailing a ship across the ocean. You can get into a ship and raise your sails, like most people do. But if you don't have a clear destination picked out and you don't take steps to steer the ship in that direction, you'll just drift aimlessly at sea. Perhaps you'll end up sailing your ship by chance to an island or other land mass, but you'll never really make any solid progress until you define where you want to go. Once you know your destination, you can use all of the tools at your disposal to actively steer the ship in the direction that will take you there.

It seems pretty obvious, yet so few software developers ever define goals for their career—why? I can only guess here, but I'd say that most software developers are afraid of committing to a long-term vision for their career. They want to leave all options open to them, because they're afraid of choosing one path and going down that path. *What if it's the wrong path? What if I don't like where it takes me?* These are scary questions indeed.

Some developers just haven't even really given it much thought at all. Left to our own devices, we tend to just follow the path that's laid out for us. It's a much more difficult job to create our own path, so we just don't do it. Instead, we just take the first job we get an offer for and stay at that job until a better opportunity comes along or we get fired—I mean “laid off.”

Whatever your reason may be for not defining goals for your career, now is the time to do it. Not tomorrow, not next week, but right now. Every step you take without a clear direction is a wasted step. Don't randomly walk through life without a purpose for your career.

How to set goals

Okay, so now that I've convinced you that you need to set goals, how do you do it? It's easiest to start out with a big goal in mind and then create smaller goals along the way that will help you get to the bigger goal. A big goal is usually not very specific, because it's hard to define something that's potentially very far off very clearly. But, that's okay. You don't have to be very specific when you define a big, far-off goal. Your big goal just has to be specific enough to give you a clear direction in which to travel. Going back to the ship analogy, if I want to sail to China, I don't have to know the exact latitude and longitude of the port I want to get to right away. I can get in my ship and start heading in the direction of China, and when I get closer, I can always get more specific. All I need to know to get started out is whether I'm getting closer to China or further from it.

So, your big goal should be something not too specific, but clear enough that you can know if you're steering toward it or not. Think about what you want to ultimately do with your career. Do you want to become a manager or executive at a company? Do you want to go out and start your own software development business some day? Do you want to become an entrepreneur creating your own product and bringing it to market? For me, my goal was always to eventually be able to get out on my own and work for myself.

It's really up to you to define what your big goal is. What do you want to get out of your career? Where would you like to see yourself in 5 or 10 years? Go ahead and spend some time thinking about this—it's really important.

Once you've figured out what your big, far-off goal is, the next step is to chart a course to get there by making smaller goals along the way. Sometimes it helps to think backwards from your big goal to your present situation. If you had already achieved your big goal, what would have been some of the milestones along the way? What path could you imagine tracing backwards from your big goal to your present situation?

At one time, I had a big goal of losing about 100 pounds of weight. I had let myself get out of shape and I wanted to get back on track. So, I set for myself smaller goals of losing 5 pounds every two weeks. Every two weeks that I was able to reach my smaller goal, it moved me forward toward my big goal.

If you can make small goals that gradually move you forward in the direction toward your bigger goals, you'll eventually reach your destination. It's important to have various sizes of goals that lead you in the direction of your big goal. For example, you might have a yearly goal of reading so many technical books or learning a new programming language. That yearly goal might be a smaller goal that will lead you toward your bigger goal of becoming a senior-level

developer. But that yearly goal might be broken up into smaller goals of reading a single book each month or making some defined amount of progress each day.

The smaller goals keep you on track and keep you motivated so that you keep heading in the direction of your bigger goals. If you just set out to accomplish a big goal and don't have smaller goals along the way, you don't end up having time to course-correct when you're off track. Smaller goals also give you frequent rewards that help motivate you. Small victories each day and each week help us feel like we're making progress and accomplishing things, which makes us feel good about ourselves and helps us keep moving forward. Smaller goals also don't seem as daunting as a big goal.

Consider writing this book. Right now I have a goal for writing so much of this book each day and each week. I'm not trying to tackle the huge goal of writing the entire book, but instead I'm looking at it from the perspective of what my goal is for each day, knowing that by doing what I need to do each day, I'll eventually reach my big goal of completing the entire book.

So, if you haven't given much time to think about your future and you don't have at least one clear and definite goal you're aiming toward, put down this book and define some goals for yourself. It's not easy, but you'll be glad you did it. Don't be a ship floating aimlessly in the ocean. Chart a course before you set sail.

Tracking your goals

Periodically, you should track and update the goals you have set for yourself—and adjust them if necessary. You don't want to travel miles off course before you discover your mistake, and you probably don't want to travel very far down a path that turns out to be the wrong one, either.

I'd recommend setting regular intervals for checking up on your goals. This will help you to make adjustments when needed and help keep you accountable. You might want to review the goals you set for each week at the end of that week before you plan out the next week. That same goes for every month, quarter, and even year.

It can be very helpful to reflect on what you accomplished during small and large time periods so that you can figure out if you're making the right amount of progress or you need to make some kind of adjustment.

Taking action

- Sit down and write out at least one major goal for your career.
- Break down that major goal into smaller goals that correspond to:
 - Months
 - Weeks
 - Days

- Write down your major goal where you can see it each day to remind you of what you're striving for.

