

You Need an Exit Plan

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Throughout the nearly three years of career advice from “Carpe Careers,” we’ve advised you on myriad topics -- including [pursuing professional development opportunities](#) and [networking, writing application documents, interviewing](#) and [the existential crisis of leaving academia](#), to name just a few. You name it, we’ve discussed it.

Put simply, the culmination of our advice should be to tell you that [you need a plan](#). You need a map of the steps to take toward your career goals -- from soft- and technical-skill development, to the people you should meet and speak to in order to help you land that next job. But with all the focus on your next steps, there has been little discussion of what you leave behind. In other words, as you embark on your next career steps, how do you manage a graceful and less stressful departure from your current job? A new job offer may tempt you to [go out in a blaze of glory](#) (advice: don’t), but the manner in which you leave your current job has professional implications. In addition, you must consider personal matters, especially regarding finances and your health care.

It pays to think about your exit strategy as part of your overall career plan, now and at future steps along the way.

Determine when to inform your supervisor. When you decide it is time to move on, and you begin the job search and application processes, the first step in your exit strategy is deciding whether your search is clandestine or public. More to the point, when do you inform your supervisor? We can break this down into two parts.

First, when do you tell your supervisor that you are actively looking for a job? Generally, my advice is do not inform your supervisor that you are on the job market, even if your relationship with them is stellar. Doing otherwise can risk damage to that relationship, as they may question your productivity, commitment or dedication, among other things. Furthermore, if you inform your supervisor, and your job search takes longer than expected, general knowledge of your desire to leave may limit or prevent other opportunities with your current employer. It may also open you up to retaliation, however illegal that may be.

For graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, my advice comes with a grain of salt, as your career stage influences the decision to inform your supervisor. Clearly, as each is a temporary training position, the implication is that you will move on to a different job once your training period is over. So it may seem natural to want to inform your supervisor of your job search. If your supervisor is a decent mentor, they may, in fact, actively be involved in helping you in your search, no matter your intended career goals. But that is where it may get complicated.

If you are a graduate student planning to pursue a postdoctoral position, or a postdoctoral scholar planning to pursue a faculty position, you should most likely inform your adviser, as they will play a role in your next step in the form of a reference and letter of recommendation. But for many trainees with nonacademic career goals, communicating such goals may be difficult and may even create conflict between you and your supervisor -- especially if they have expectations that you will follow in their footsteps.

Here, I suggest defaulting to a clandestine job search. But if you choose to inform your supervisor, [David A. McDonald from the Duke University Career Center](#) gives great advice on discussing nonacademic career plans with your supervisor and cultivating multiple mentors.

Second, when do you tell your supervisor that you have a new job and you are resigning? That decision is easy: not until you have received and signed a written offer letter from your new employer. Until the ink is dry on the offer letter, anything can happen -- minds can change, and offers can be rescinded. Granted, this is worst-case scenario, but do not quit your current job before accepting the new one, as you do not want to end up with neither. When you do end up resigning from your current position, it is professional courtesy to do so verbally and in person with your supervisor, in addition to providing a formal letter of resignation.

But before signing an offer on the dotted line and handing in your letter of resignation, there are a whole other set of decisions to make.

Choose your transition dates wisely. The second part of your exit strategy is setting your dates appropriately. You should be concerned about three dates when transitioning between jobs: 1) the date you notify your supervisor/employer, 2) your end date with your current employer and 3) the start date with your new employer. Generally, I advise people, graduate students and postdoctoral scholars included, to give at least four weeks' notice to your current employer, despite the generally acceptable two weeks' notice. With your new employer, a written offer will include a start date, and in most cases, that date is negotiable.

For graduate students, regardless of career track, it is probably easiest for you to plan forward from the date of your defense, which effectively functions as both your notice date and end date. For postdoctoral scholars pursuing an academic track, planning backward from a start date is usually easiest, as most universities will ask you to report to their campus in July or August prior to the start of the academic year. If you are a postdoctoral scholar pursuing a nonacademic career, the decision is yours whether you plan from your start or end date.

Whatever method works best for you, there are both professional and personal matters to consider before setting these dates.

Tying up loose ends: How you leave your job reflects greatly on how others perceive you professionally. Bridges burn quickly if you leave your affairs in disarray. Before you leave, wrap up all of your projects, or at least make them easily accessible by your supervisor and colleagues such that the work can continue. You should organize, catalog and make accessible to those you leave behind your electronic and paper files and any other materials. The question to ask yourself is: How much time do I need to wrap up my affairs? Extenuating circumstances aside, the amount of time needed to bring your affairs into order is the least amount of notice you should give to your current employer.

Your paycheck: As a graduate student or postdoctoral scholar, money is most likely a huge concern. Choose dates that allow you the most financial security, keeping in mind that a gap between your end and start dates will be a gap without a paycheck. Choose an end date on the last day of a pay period and a start date on the first day of a pay period. In this way, your last and first paychecks will be full paychecks.

Your health insurance: When you select your start and end dates, the most important factor to consider is your health insurance coverage -- whether it is only you being covered, or you and your family. It may seem mundane in your decision, but each date determines the end and start of your coverage and requires some investigation to determine how it works. In my advising appointments, I often find that graduate students and postdocs had not considered their health coverage in their job transition.

For example, when resigning from your current job, your health coverage may continue until the end of the month following your last day of employment. Similarly, your start date with your new employer determines when your health insurance coverage begins. Often, your coverage begins on the first day of the month following your start date. If you start on the first of the month, it may even start that day. If possible, choose your end dates and start dates to avoid long gaps in your coverage.

If a long gap is unavoidable, the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA) is a federal law that allows you to keep your current employer group health plan in order to bridge the gap. But beware that such an option is expensive. To select an appropriate date, investigate your current insurance policy guidelines with your provider or benefits department. Additionally, ask for a benefits overview guide from your new employer to determine when your new coverage will begin.

Relocation: You may also need to consider the time needed to wrap up your personal affairs, especially if you are relocating for your new job. Whether you are moving yourself or hiring movers to do it, assume that the time required

to identify and secure housing and physically relocate is directly proportional to the size and distance of your move. If you are offered a relocation package, utilize it to the fullest extent. If you are funding your own move and moving greater than 50 miles, your relocation costs are tax deductible.

Leave your contact information. The last step of your exit strategy concerns how you will maintain the relationship with your former employer. Like all relationships, communication is key, and your relationship with your former employer does not necessarily end on your end date. Undoubtedly, questions will arise, or forms will need to be mailed. So, at the very least, make sure someone knows how to contact you after you leave.

As career advisers, our mantra is to create a plan. And here, I advise that an exit strategy needs to be incorporated into your overall career plan, both now and in all of your future jobs. But we know, as you do, that you cannot plan for everything. Although I do not wish it upon you, you will have jobs that you will hate, from which you cannot leave fast enough. And that's OK. What is important is that you plan to leave in the most professional manner possible, giving thought to the matters that affect you personally.