

## **Your First Date: A Successful Career Path for Life**

You may ask what do dating and your career have in common?

Well, much like dating, many young professionals believe that it can be helpful to try out different things to figure out what makes you happy. In order to create a perfect career path and find a lifelong satisfying career in the engineering industry you have to start at the beginning with the First Date. But just like in dating, one who “has no staying power” gives the perception that they are indecisive and unable to commit.

You may look around you and see many professionals happily committed to their careers and wonder why this bliss came so easy to them. This success didn’t happen overnight. The keys to a successful career begin with a first date: figuring out what you want, with careful consideration and not too many false starts, and then creating a career plan to get there. Brainstorming, writing, implementing and updating a clear plan are essential steps - ones to work on continuously throughout a career in order to stay on track. It is truly a lifelong process.

Many young professionals come out of college and hit the ground running. They bury themselves in work and professional organizations. Often, they are so excited to land that first job, and to have the newfound freedom of a steady paycheck that they may never stop to take time to think about where they are headed with all of this effort. They may be working hard, but how do they know if they are working smart? How do they know if theirs is “a successful career path for life?”

Success can mean many things to different people, which is why it is so important to define it for yourself. Like a business plan for an entrepreneur that is starting his/her own business, your successful career path is an individualized plan, and should lay out your life goals on what you want to do “when you grow-up.” It doesn’t have to be formal or in report format as it is just for “you.” However, it should be written, and it should include a key few elements.

### **Research**

Spend some time on the internet reading through journals, newsletters, and websites. A good place to start is here at the AWWA website. Educate yourself about new trends, technologies, and companies, and learn as much as you can about your field. Getting more involved in AWWA can help give you enough ‘first dates’ to better understand what you want and how you can get there. Jot down notes and start educating yourself. Not only will this make you a better engineer, but it will also help you learn about your likes/dislikes and help you start figuring out the direction you want to take.

### **Goals**

Set specific, written, and measurable goals on where you want to be each year with your career. Your goals can be anything you want. For example, I have seen goals ranging from wanting to be a leader in a professional organization, to sitting for your PE license, to opening-up your own firm one day. There is no “right” or “wrong,” it is purely about what you want.

## Operating Plan

Take the goals that you have defined and lay out an operating plan on how they will be accomplished. Do not be overwhelmed here; you don't have to do it all at once. It will be easier if you take it one step at a time. For all of us overachievers out there, be realistic on what can be accomplished during any given year. Set clear steps that you will take to implement your plan. Ask a friend or mentor to review your plan to make sure it is reasonable.

## Review/Update/Maintain

Now it's time to set the wheels in motion. Make sure that what you are doing is helping you to achieve your goals. Be focused and purposeful. It is better to get really involved in one organization than to spread yourself too thin with activities that might distract from the goal. Periodically, dust off your plan to review your specific goals and make alterations as needed. This is an ever evolving plan that will change over the years as your personal and professional goals change.

Now go out there, start writing your successful career path for life and go on your first "date" with your career. I'll join you next time to talk about "Getting Engaged: Networking, Networking, Networking."



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