

# Professional Identity

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# Professional identity?

**Your professional identity is how others view you in a professional setting. This is determined by how you portray yourself.**

The way leaders present themselves is often thoughtfully crafted: it's chosen so that they can portray their preferred professional identity. They might make conscious decisions about the way they dress, the language they use, and the way they engage with people. Think about some famous leaders like Malala Yousafzai, Joe Wicks and Mo Farrah: they all have their own identity, which is instantly recognisable. Think about other leaders who you respect. What is it about them that makes you recognise them, and look up to them?

When people try to adopt a professional identity by mimicking someone else's, this often fails. It will appear inauthentic and forced to people around them. And if someone is not being their true self, their self-esteem and confidence can be negatively affected.

When you develop your professional identity, think about which of your attributes are strong and positive. Make sure that the way you behave and present yourself at work accentuates these positive attributes. It's completely normal to have other attributes you want to develop, such as your ability to be assertive. As you develop and improve upon these other attributes and skills, you should consider whether you want to promote them as part of your professional identity.

# The five stages to developing your professional identity

- Stage 1: Self-reflection - who are you?
- Stage 2: Understanding your goals - where do you want to go?
- Stage 3: Determining your identity
- Stage 4: Promoting your identity
- Stage 5: Regular evaluation and improvement

## Stage 1 - Self-reflection - who are you?

Everyone in the workplace - whether they are an employee or are self-employed - has a professional identity. This is based on the opinions their immediate and wider colleagues have about them, and how they talk about them when they are not in the room.

The first step to cultivating your professional identity is to reflect on your personality type. To help with this process, ask trusted friends and colleagues to provide you with feedback about how they view you. Some workplaces may also use a range of different psychometric tools (such as Jungian models and Myers Briggs), which can also help you to identify your strengths and weaknesses.

Consider the feedback about yourself that you receive carefully. There will be positives that you like and want to accentuate. There may also be some areas you want to manage and develop.

Paul Long, Technical Director has the following advice about psychometric tests

*When you complete these tests they often favour certain personality traits. For example, as an introvert I always score low on communication and this is often perceived to be a weakness for someone like myself who leads a team. I know I prefer to talk to people 1-2-1 and this means I often have more open and in-depth conversations. Although I am aware of my preference, and discuss this at interview, at*

*the same time I often push myself outside my comfort zone and take opportunities to present to larger audiences at industry events. This not only provides me with examples to talk about at interview, these opportunities also mean those who are interviewing have often attended one of my presentations and are already familiar with my work.*

## **Stage 2 - Understanding your goals - where do you want to go?**

An organisation is made up of a range of people with different personalities and aspirations. Their goals are likely to change as they progress through their career and develop their personal life.

Your professional identity should fit with your career goals. Your qualifications and professional memberships are a powerful tool which you can use to influence others in your field to help you reach your career goals. As such, you should advertise these details when appropriate, which may include adding them to your work email signature.

Examples of career goals include:

- To move into a leadership position
- To become an expert in a chosen subject area
- To develop your professional network or contacts
- To gain wider experience in a new field

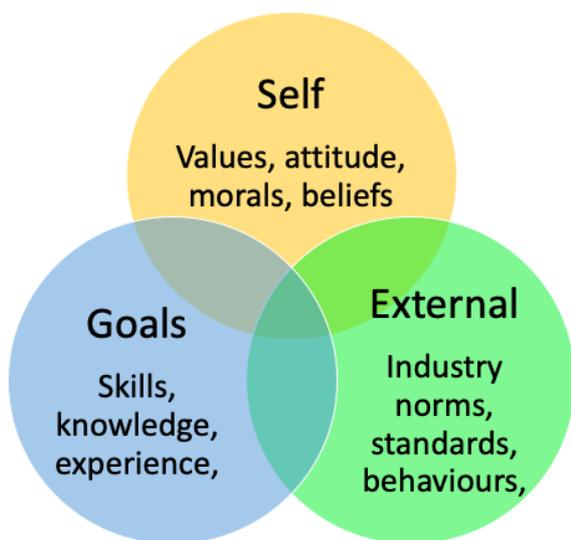
A good way to develop and explore your career goals is to discuss them with a friend or mentor. Talking about things and hearing your ideas out loud can help you to process your thoughts and understand why your goals are important to you.

## **Stage 3 - Determining your professional identity**

Your professional identity incorporates a range of behaviours, like how you dress, the way you act, and how you react to others, including peers, superiors, and customers.

After completing stages 1 & 2 of the 5 stage professional identity process, you will have a better understanding of who you are and where you want to go. This is critical for ensuring that the identity you portray to others is true to yourself, but also fits with your ambitions and development. You don't need to alter your entire persona or change who you are, but your professional identity should be centred around parts of your authentic self that you would like to accentuate in order to achieve your career goals.

Give consideration to the industry norms of your organisation, and of the area you would like to progress to. Most professions are characterised by a common language, style of dress, or accepted behaviours. In some instances, it may be beneficial for you to adopt traits and behaviours of the group you aspire to be a part of. Conversely, you may decide that you want to stand out from the crowd and steer clear of accepted 'norms'. It may be that in the short term you need to adopt some behaviours to be accepted, which will help you to reach your long term goals. You cannot be flexible with regards to standards of professionalism that your chosen field requires you to observe.



Your professional identity is therefore an overlap of your self, your goals, and external requirements.

So, ask yourself:

- What positive attributes do I want to project about myself?
- How can I develop my professional identity to help me achieve my goals?
- How can I influence my peers to invest in me?

It is worth considering some examples to illustrate this process.

### **Example 1**

A Technical Consultant wants to be promoted within their team to the role of Technical Expert. They make a plan to ensure they meet the essential specifications for this role.

They ask if they can be mentored by a Technical Expert and for this mentoring to include:

- Observing the practice of the Technical Expert
- Being observed leading two sessions as a Technical Expert, and acquiring feedback
- Working with the Technical Expert to develop a bespoke professional development plan, which includes the skills and attributes they must develop

This process enables the consultant to attain demonstrable experience in their desired role. In interviews for promotion they will be able to discuss their experiences, their perceived strengths, as well as any areas they need to develop and how they are tackling any weaknesses. Their mentor will also be able to provide them with a suitable reference.

To further demonstrate their knowledge and commitment to their company, they keep abreast of industry news. They use this as an opportunity to write social media posts for the company's website, which further highlight their technical expertise to their seniors.

### **Example 2**

A Science Teacher is advised that the Head of Science at their school is moving on. The position is soon to be advertised to internal and external candidates. The teacher hopes to be considered for the position, so they check the job specification to ensure their skills and experience match requirements. Their school provides teaching staff with teaching mentors. The teacher requests that their mentor, who is a senior member of staff in the same department, helps them by:

- Observing them teaching, and hosting a mock interview with them, before providing constructive feedback on both
- Allowing the teacher to observe them teaching
- Giving them feedback on their application notes, with suggestions for how they can develop their skills and experience

This process allows the teacher to develop and improve upon their teaching skills and experience. They can promote their noted teaching strengths, whilst developing areas of relative weakness in preparation for their interview. They can also learn expected teaching methods from their mentor, who can provide a reference which states the teacher has demonstrated the ability and desire to develop professionally.

#### **Stage 4 - Promoting your identity**

Once you have determined what your professional identity is, you need to consider how you can promote yourself. This may be through public speaking, social events, internal meetings, conferences, journals or on social media. Think about your piece of the P.I.E.- that is, your day-to-day performance, your public image, and your exposure.

Self-promotion is a key part of expanding upon your professional identity. Imagine you work in marketing: you are the product you want to sell to your audience, and the place you promote your product must fit with your professional identity. Think about the leaders we mentioned at the beginning of this document and how they present themselves. Malala Yousafzai is an activist focussed on ensuring that all girls worldwide can learn and lead. Born in Pakistan, she was targeted by the Taliban after speaking out about their restrictions on female education. After moving to England she focused on her own education and gained a degree from the University of Oxford. She speaks nationwide about gender equality. Through the 'Malala Fund' she offers an 18-month internship to support girls to drive change not only within their own communities but nationwide too.

#### **Stage 5 - Regular evaluation and improvement**

Once you've made your initial professional identity plan and have put this into action, you need to set aside time to assess whether it is working for you. Most people will find that they achieve a number of successes, but that there are also areas for improvement. We work in an ever-changing environment. Your goals will change, and most importantly, so will you. So regardless of how effective your initial professional identity plan was, it will need regular review and evaluation.

Feedback and mentoring are essential for this process. They will help to ensure that your updated plans are challenging you to make effective change, which will enable you to achieve your goals.

# Case Study



**Name:** Oliver

**Occupation:** Policy Advisor

**Twitter:** xxxx

## **Describe your professional identity**

Knowledgeable, insightful, and articulate. In other words, I want my colleagues and peers to trust that I understand my work and can express that analysis clearly and concisely.

But that's a rather generic answer. To give you some texture: I work in science policy, but I'm not a scientist. Instead, I get to work with scientists, clinicians and researchers and translate their expertise into analysis that policymakers (e.g. MPs and civil servants) can use. So my professional identity is being that fun little nexus between science and policy.

## **How do you portray this identity?**

Above all, I ensure my work is consistently reliable and useful. If what I produce isn't accurate and well-evidenced, then my colleagues and peers will lose trust in my work, and if that work doesn't meet the needs of its audience, then I'll be perceived as lacking the skills that underpin my professional identity.

Alongside the work I do for my job, I use online media to showcase my work, such as posts on my Twitter and LinkedIn. I also write blogs for my website, which translate my workplace analysis and ideas into a more publicly accessible format.

## **Has your identity changed since you graduated?**

Interesting question. I'd say that the idea of being a science-policy nexus has crystallised a lot since I graduated. I've also become much more comfortable talking with strangers and putting myself out there in semi-social environments, like networking events. But I'm still fairly young in my career (I've been working for just under four years now), so I'm sure it'll keep changing.

## **What tips do you have for students who are graduating this year with regards to developing their workplace identity?**

The best advice I can give is to ask lots of questions. If you're just starting your career, no one is expecting you to be the very best you can be, that's just not feasible. Spend this time learning about your work and understanding what it is that *you* bring to the table. Once you understand that, you'll have a better grasp of how your colleagues and peers see you.

## Worksheet 1 – Overview

My goals	My strengths	Target audience

Where are my target audience? (Opportunities for exposure)	What is my professional identity/public image?	Areas for development

## Worksheet 2 – Plan of action

**Professionally I want to be viewed  
as...  
(Identity)**

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### **Performance and exposure - To achieve this I am going to ...**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Activity</b>





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