

SWOT analysis

A SWOT analysis is one of several business planning tools that an organisation can use to examine its state of health and investigate business opportunities by itemising its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). It can also be used on a personal basis in a variety of career applications.

Why is it important?

Whether you're mulling over a major career change or have your sights set on becoming an HR director in a top five legal firm, carrying out a SWOT analysis will give an in-depth focus on areas that need attention as well as provide a footing for a personal development or career action plan.

If you're in the position of having several job offers it could also help determine which organisation offers the most prospects and fits with your way of working. In a wider departmental context, a SWOT analysis could be used to help improve performance, or evaluate the potential outcome of a new initiative.

Even if you think that your career is progressing as intended, carrying out the exercise could prevent you from resting on your laurels.

Where do you start?

Every aspect of a SWOT analysis needs to be approached methodically. Think about your reasons for carrying out the analysis and what you hope to achieve. Then with headings for each category drawn up in a table divided into factors that you can control (strengths, weaknesses) and those you can't (opportunities, threats), set to work on your list. The following are just a few of a wide range of considerations you'll need to take into account when conducting a personal SWOT exercise.

Strengths

Determining your skills, experience and capabilities is probably the most straightforward part of this exercise. List tasks you are good at and enjoy doing as this will form the basis from which to build competitive advantage. What skills do you have that employers want? Work experience, qualifications and training, and transferable skills will figure largely here. Personal development programmes (PDPs), performance reviews and self-assessment using a broad range of freely available assessment tools can be effective in helping to identify skills and knowledge new skills that you've have. Also consider your working relationships - good relationships with your manager or colleagues are a plus.

Remember that what may be seen as strength in one organisation could be a weakness in another. Aspects of your private life such as solid, stable family situation, ability to relocate, financial security and good health will also come into play.

Weaknesses

Because of their career-limiting potential, you need to be brutally honest and entirely objective in any assessment of your downsides. Once again make use of the broad range of freely available

assessment tools which can be very helpful in helping to identify any gaps in your skills and knowledge . A sketchy and intermittent career path, for instance, will require plausible and convincing explanations, while financial insecurity could place a huge emphasis on the need to increase your salary. Also, try to do this part of the exercise from the perspective of how others see you - ideally elicit feedback from a mentor or current or previous managers.

Opportunities

What do you want to be doing in three or five years' time? Are there aspects of your role or even side interests that could be taken further? Have you considered an HR specialism, such as compensation and benefits, or is there an opportunity to get more project management experience under your belt? Can you network across departments to find the fresh challenge you're seeking?

You may not want to leave the function, but if the long-term career path isn't going to match expectations, maybe it's time to consider consultancy work? Alternatively, is there a hobby that presents an alternative career path? Consider how best to relate your strengths to the opportunities available.

Threats

Anything that prevents you from achieving a career goal is a threat. This could range from intense competition for a job you wish to go for to your organisation's lack of financial stability and the attendant risk of downsizing. You may even feel that you've been doing the same thing for too long which has implications for your performance.

Incorporate an action plan

When you have detailed your SWOT analysis points, work out your individual goals and objectives. If it indicates that to reach the next rung on the career ladder further training or qualifications are required, build in the necessary steps to acquire them.

Conducting a group SWOT analysis

If the SWOT analysis involves more than one participant, it will be more fruitful if you brief those involved to do some thinking about the analysis beforehand. This gives the time to do any necessary background research and/or elicit feedback that could bring added value to the brainstorming session. Remind them that they should think from the perspective of key stakeholders. Also stress that they should consider existing and future strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. .

If you only do five things...

- 1 Work out what you hope to achieve
- 2 Allow sufficient time to conduct the analysis properly
- 3 Be objective at all times
- 4 Incorporate your findings into an action plan
- 5 Regularly revisit your findings

Expert's view David Spencer on carrying out group swots

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When did you last carry out a SWOT analysis?

I'm currently working with an executive management team for a private housing organisation on leadership, empowerment and performance management. I used a SWOT analysis of its entire business to establish its current position, facilitate debate around the findings, and to better understand the business. This is especially valuable when working with a new organisation and a new group of people.

Are there any downsides to using a SWOT analysis?

It often takes more time than anticipated to do it properly. However, this is compensated by the value of the output generated. Any cynics taking part may need to be managed effectively, to avoid the exercise becoming unnecessarily pessimistic. It is also important to explain clearly the differences between internal issues (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats), as participants can often find these confusing. I wouldn't recommend using one in isolation - other tools, such as competitor analysis reports, and customer and employee surveys, will provide a detailed and balanced picture.

How often should you revisit your findings?

This will depend on how strategic or tactical the project or initiative is. Strategic projects, such as annual business plans, should be reviewed on a yearly basis. Tactical projects, such as reviewing core working hours, may benefit from more regular reviews.

What are the common mistakes?

The initiator of the exercise influences the type of response they expect to see, whether deliberate or sub-consciously. This can inhibit participant responses and may reduce the breadth of information uncovered. It is also really important to involve colleagues at all levels in the organisation as well as valuing all contributions to ensure that key issues are not overlooked