

Planning Your Professional Future with GAPS

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Executive Summary

The world of work is changing at a pace unlike any seen before. Artificial intelligence, sustainability transitions, and demographic shifts are reshaping industries and professions across the globe. Traditional career planning models that assumed stable career ladders and predictable industry trends are no longer reliable. Instead, professionals must adopt adaptive frameworks that can keep pace with the rapid evolution of the labor market.



This White Paper introduces the **GAPS model**—Goals, Abilities, Perceptions, and Standards—as a dynamic tool for career planning. When combined with the techniques of **forecasting** (identifying future roles and sectors of growth) and **backcasting** (working backward from desired roles to today), the GAPS model provides a structured approach to planning and action.

Note: In workforce training, the acronym “GAPS” is sometimes used to mean **Gaps Analysis in Skills Development**, for an employees current job (or expected job growth path) with a narrow focus on identifying differences between current and required technical skills. While related, this White Paper uses GAPS to mean **Goals, Abilities, Perceptions, and Standards**. This broader framework helps professionals align not only their skills, but also their aspirations, reputations, and industry benchmarks with the evolving future of work.

By applying this process, professionals can:

- Identify emerging opportunities in the labor market
- Map personal strengths and weaknesses against future role requirements
- Understand how they are perceived by others compared to industry standards
- Create a practical action plan to bridge gap between current state and their aspirations

To help readers take immediate action, this paper provides:

- Example tables of forecasted job opportunities and backcasted pathways
- A detailed walkthrough of the GAPS model
- Suggested GenAI prompts that can be used with any AI platform—or the [Pi-Career Compass™ Custom GPT](#)—to explore personal career scenarios in greater depth

Appendices Roadmap

This White Paper includes several appendices that extend the framework with practical tools and resources. **Appendix A** outlines best practices for using GenAI in career planning, along with guidance for attribution. **Appendix B** provides the GAPS template for mapping Goals, Abilities, Perceptions, and Standards. **Appendix C** highlights forecasting sources, while **Appendix D** offers further readings. **Appendix E** introduces a Career Skills Self-Assessment tool, and

Appendix F compiles dynamic resources—online learning platforms and professional networks—that support long-term career growth.

Introduction: The Future of Work Landscape

Careers are no longer linear. For much of the twentieth century, professionals could expect to join a company, advance within a fairly predictable hierarchy, and retire from the same industry decades later. Today, that stability has been disrupted by automation, globalization, sustainability imperatives, and rapidly shifting consumer expectations. Some of the jobs that will dominate the next decade have not yet been invented, while others that seemed secure are already at risk of automation or decline.

This reality can feel overwhelming. How can professionals plan their futures when the ground keeps shifting beneath their feet? The answer lies not in attempting to predict every change but in using flexible tools that combine long-term vision with continuous self-assessment. The **GAPS model** provides that balance. It allows individuals to define their destination, evaluate their current position, understand external expectations, and build a roadmap for growth.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"What are the top five forces shaping the future of work in my industry, and how should I prepare for them?"

Positioning: Riding the Wave

Over the course of a lifetime, most professionals will hold **10 to 15 different jobs**, and as many as **five to seven of those may be in entirely different careers**. Expect, acceleration. This reality underscores the importance of positioning. The challenge is not just to find your next role, but to position yourself so that each move builds toward long-term opportunity.

Positioning begins with finding intersections: things you like, things you love, things you are good at, natural aptitudes, and areas that are in high demand. Careers flourish when personal strengths align with external needs. Just as important, positioning ensures that the qualifications you build today—education, certifications, experiences—are aligned with **emerging trends and the future economy**.

Waves of change—automation, green transitions, demographic shifts—will come whether we are ready or not. Those who ride them with preparation and adaptability will advance, while those who resist may struggle.

"Both the riptides and the breakers are bigger than ever. Don't fight the current; select your waves when they are right for you."

Sometimes it takes years, even decades, to build the right portfolio of skills. It may require five, ten, or even thirty years to bring together technical expertise, leadership experience, and visibility at the precise moment when the market is ready. But when it all comes together—when preparation meets opportunity—you may find yourself in the perfect place at the perfect time.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"[Draft resume attached.] What career positioning strategies would help me align my passions, skills, and long-term qualifications with high-demand trends over the next 10 years?"

Forecasting and Backcasting: Seeing the Future, Planning Backwards

To make smart career decisions, it helps to start by looking outward. **Forecasting** provides a horizon view of where the job market is headed by highlighting roles, industries, and skill sets likely to grow in demand. **Backcasting**, by contrast, personalizes this information by working backward from a chosen future role to identify the steps needed today.

Together, these two techniques create a powerful cycle: forecast to see what is possible, backcast to make it personal, and then refine your goals.

Table 1. Sample Forecast of Emerging Careers (2025–2035)

Career Path	Expected Growth Rate	Key Drivers	Core Skills Needed
AI/Machine Learning Specialist	+30%	Automation, data-driven decision-making	Programming, AI literacy, data science
Renewable Energy Engineer	+25%	Green transition, climate policies, energy demand	Electrical/mechanical engineering, sustainability knowledge
Healthcare Professional (Nurse Practitioner, Physician Assistant)	+28%	Aging population, healthcare access	Clinical training, patient care, empathy
Cybersecurity Analyst	+32%	Digital threats, data privacy regulation	Network security, risk analysis, problem-solving
UX/UI Designer	+20%	Digital economy, user-centered design	Design tools, user research, creativity
Sustainability Consultant	+22%	ESG requirements, corporate sustainability	Project management, ESG reporting, communication

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"What are the top five fastest-growing careers in [my country/region/occupation] for the next 10 years, and what skills do they require?"

Table 2. Sample Backcasting Pathway

Target Role (2030)	Future Requirements	Backcasted Steps (2025–2029)
Sustainability Consultant	Certification in ESG reporting	Enroll in ESG certification program within 12 months
	Experience managing sustainability projects	Volunteer to lead a green initiative at current workplace
	Strong industry network and visibility	Join sustainability associations, publish 2 articles online per year

By combining the two methods, professionals can both **see the horizon** and **chart a pathway**. For example, a young professional interested in both technology and sustainability may review forecasts showing high growth in AI and renewable energy roles. Backcasting from each option allows them to compare what additional training or experience would be required, making it easier to choose the path that best matches their strengths and passions.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Show me a comparison table of three potential career paths (AI Specialist, Renewable Energy Engineer, and UX Designer) including growth rates, key skills, and typical entry requirements. Then suggest which one I could backcast from given my current skills [insert skills]."

Section I: Define Your Destination (Goals)

The starting point for any meaningful career planning exercise is clarity about where you want to go. Too often, professionals focus only on their next job title or immediate promotion, but the most effective planning looks further ahead. Instead of asking, “What’s my next move?” you begin by imagining yourself five or ten years from now in your ideal role. This longer horizon provides a more stable foundation for your planning, even if the workplace itself is shifting rapidly.

This future-focused approach is called **backcasting**. Unlike forecasting, which projects trends outward from today, backcasting asks you to define your desired endpoint and then look backward to the present to see what milestones and achievements would have been necessary to get there. For example, if you envision yourself as a Sustainability Director for a global company in 2030, what educational background, leadership experiences, certifications, and industry knowledge would have made that possible? Working backwards in this way helps you avoid short-term distractions and focus on building the skills and experiences that matter most.

When defining your goals, be specific about the kinds of industries, functions, and organizations you’re drawn to. Document the three to five key requirements you believe will be most essential for success in that future role—whether that’s technical expertise, professional credentials, or leadership capabilities. These future-facing requirements then become the benchmarks for assessing where you stand today.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Help me backcast from my target career as [insert role]. What skills, certifications, and experiences should I have gained by then?"

Section II: Audit Your Starting Point (Abilities)

Having established a destination, the next step is to evaluate where you stand today. Self-awareness is essential to any planning process, but it must be grounded in both honesty and evidence. It is easy to overestimate or underestimate your own skills, so this stage requires a structured approach.

Begin by creating a full inventory of your **current skills, education, and professional experiences**. This should include both technical skills (such as programming, financial analysis, or clinical training) and human skills (such as communication, leadership, and adaptability). Rate yourself on each skill using a simple 1–5 scale, with 1 indicating beginner and 5 representing mastery. To avoid blind spots, supplement your self-ratings with input from colleagues, supervisors, or mentors.

When this exercise is complete, you will have a clear profile of your abilities. By comparing this profile against the requirements you identified in Section I, you can begin to see the gaps that need attention. This transition—from general awareness to targeted comparison—is the foundation of the GAPS analysis.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Here are my current skills [list]. Compare them to a typical [target role] job description and identify my strengths and weaknesses."

Section III: Standards and Perceptions

Careers are shaped not only by what you can do, but also by what is expected of you and how others perceive your contributions. These external factors are often overlooked in career planning, but they can be decisive in advancement.

Standards refer to the expectations set by your organization or industry. For example, a financial analyst may be expected to obtain a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) credential within a few years, or a nurse may be expected to pursue advanced clinical certifications. Understanding these standards ensures that you do not fall behind peers who are meeting them.

Perceptions involve how you are seen by others. Even if you have the right abilities, if managers and colleagues do not recognize or value them, your career progression may stall. Gathering feedback through performance reviews, 360-degree evaluations, or informal conversations provides insight into whether your self-image aligns with how others experience you.

A professional who sees themselves as a future leader, for example, may be surprised to learn that peers view them as reliable but not particularly strategic. That perception gap becomes just as important to close as a technical skills gap.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Based on my latest performance review feedback [insert key notes], what do you think others see as my strengths and weaknesses?"

Section IV: The GAPS Analysis

With goals defined, abilities assessed, and external factors understood, you are ready to conduct the GAPS analysis itself. This process compares your future requirements against your current profile to identify the gaps that stand in your way.

The GAPS Template organizes this process into four categories:

- **Education gaps** (degrees, certifications, formal training)
- **Leadership gaps** (experience managing teams, strategic influence)
- **Skill gaps** (technical, digital, industry-specific)
- **Perception/communication gaps** (feedback from peers, visibility, relationships)

By writing these down clearly, you create a personal **gap map**. This map does more than identify deficiencies; it prioritizes them. Some gaps may be urgent and achievable within months, while others may represent long-term development over several years.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Compare my current profile [insert skills] with the requirements for [target role]. Show me where the biggest gaps are."

Section V: Strategic Roadmap (Action Plan)

The final step is to turn your gap map into an actionable plan. Each gap should lead to a specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) action. Without this step, the analysis remains theoretical. With it, the process becomes a true career strategy.

Actions may take several forms:

- **Training/Education:** Completing online courses, earning certifications, or pursuing degrees
- **Experience:** Volunteering, leading new projects, or joining professional initiatives
- **Networking/Mentorship:** Building relationships, joining professional associations, and seeking mentors
- **Visibility:** Publishing articles, speaking at conferences, or contributing to thought leadership in your field

For each action, set realistic timelines: short-term (3–6 months), medium-term (1 year), and long-term (3–5 years). This structure keeps momentum while allowing flexibility as circumstances change.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Build me a 12-month action plan to close my career gaps in [list skills], including short-term training and long-term experience opportunities."

Conclusion & Next Steps

The GAPS framework is more than a one-time exercise; it is a repeatable compass for navigating your career. In workforce development, “GAPS” is often used to mean *Gaps Analysis in Skills Development*, with a focus on closing technical skill shortages. Our framework expands this view, defining GAPS as **Goals, Abilities, Perceptions, and Standards**—a broader model that integrates personal aspirations, external perceptions, and long-term positioning alongside skills.

To put this into practice:

- Begin with a **Career Skills Self-Assessment** (Appendix E) to establish your starting point
- Download and complete the **GAPS Template** (Appendix B). A *Gaps Analysis in Skill Development* that Managers and Human Resources might use to help and employee develop required job skills.
- Experiment with the **Pi-Career Compass™: GAPS Forecast Planner** Custom GPT for an interactive coaching experience
- Use **Appendix A** for best practices with GenAI, **Appendix C** for forecasting sources, **Appendix D** for further reading, and **Appendix F** for dynamic learning resources and professional networks
- Check your **active action plans weekly or monthly** to stay accountable
- Revisit your **GAPS map every 6–12 months** to remain aligned with the future of work

Above all, remember that careers are about **positioning**. Both the riptides and the breakers are bigger than ever. Don’t fight the currents; select your waves when they are right for you. The qualifications you build, the networks you join, and the action items you complete each month form the portfolio that prepares you for the right opportunities. When preparation meets the right wave, you will not only be ready—you will be in the perfect place at the perfect time... *time to “hang 10”, with all ten little piggies hanging off the tip of the board.*

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Show me how to position myself for career success in [industry/role]. Which waves should I prepare to ride, and what skills or credentials will matter most over the next decade?"

Appendices

Appendix A. Best Use of GenAI for Career Planning and GAPS Analysis

Generative AI (GenAI) tools can be transformative in career planning. Unlike static guides or one-time assessments, AI can generate tailored insights, compare job descriptions, create draft action plans, and even simulate interview scenarios. When used well, these tools accelerate self-reflection and expand awareness of opportunities. However, they should be approached as **collaborative assistants**, not unquestioned authorities.

Using GenAI to Support Career Planning

AI is particularly effective in three stages of the GAPS process:

- **Forecasting Careers:** AI can scan current trends and provide comparative tables of high-growth careers in specific regions, highlighting growth rates, drivers, and skill requirements
- **Backcasting Paths:** Once a role is chosen, AI can work backward to suggest milestones—education, certifications, projects—that logically lead from today to the target role
- **Gap Analysis:** By inputting your current skills, experience, and job goals, AI can generate a structured comparison of strengths versus requirements and identify where the gaps are most significant

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"What are three high-growth career options for someone with a background in healthcare administration, and what skills will be needed to succeed in each role over the next 10 years?"

Creating Action Plans with AI

After the gaps have been identified, GenAI can help brainstorm realistic action items. This includes recommending online courses, suggesting project ideas, drafting learning roadmaps, or providing sample timelines.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Build me a 12-month professional development plan to move from mid-level project management into renewable energy consulting. Include training, projects, and networking steps."

Disclosure and Attribution

As powerful as AI is, transparency in its use is increasingly expected in both professional and academic settings. Just as you would cite a book or article that informed your thinking, it is best practice to **disclose when GenAI has been used** to generate ideas, draft content, or shape a career plan. This protects credibility and ensures clarity about which insights were human-authored versus AI-assisted.

A useful resource is the **Pi-CiteRight™ 3: AI Disclose, Attribute, Co-Create**, a Custom GPT designed to help authors, professionals, and researchers properly cite and disclose their use of AI in text and visuals. It provides models for attribution statements, evaluates whether AI use should be disclosed, and ensures ethical, accurate credit.

 **Pi-CiteRight™ 3: AI Disclose, Attribute, Co-Create**
Guide to GenAI co-creation, disclosure, and attribution for academic, professional, and creative use
<https://chatgpt.com/g/g-68dd51bcceec8191bbff9b8b6483a94a-pi-citerighttm-3-ai-disclose-attribute-co-create>

Suggested GenAI Prompt:
"Evaluate this career development plan [paste plan] and suggest which parts could benefit from disclosure of AI assistance, and how to phrase that disclosure."

Appendix B. The GAPS Tool and the Use of Action Items

The **GAPS framework**—Goals, Abilities, Perceptions, and Standards—provides a structured way to align your present capabilities with your future aspirations. While the main White Paper introduces the framework, this appendix expands on how to apply the tool step by step, using the GAPS Template, and how to transform identified gaps into actionable next steps.

Two Uses of GAPS

- *Workforce Training:* Gaps Analysis in Skills Development (skills-only lens)
- *Career Compass Model:* Goals, Abilities, Perceptions, Standards (broader career, long-term, strategy)

Applying the GAPS Tool in Practice

The GAPS Template is designed to guide a professional through reflection and comparison. At its core, it asks four questions:

- **Goals:** Where do you want to go?
- **Abilities:** What can you do now?
- **Perceptions:** How do others see you?
- **Standards:** What does your boss, organization, or industry expect?

Example: GAPS Analysis Snapshot

GAPS Dimension	Example Input	Gap Identified
Goals	Transition to Data Scientist role	—
Abilities	Strong Python skills, basic statistics	Lacks advanced machine learning knowledge

GAPS Dimension	Example Input	Gap Identified
Perceptions	Seen as reliable but not innovative	Needs to enhance creative problem-solving visibility
Standards	Industry norms require data science certification	Must complete professional certification

Moving from Gaps to Action Items

Identifying gaps is only the first step. The more critical phase is translating those gaps into **action items**—specific commitments that close the distance between current state and desired future.

Action items should follow the **SMART criteria**: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Example: Turning GAPS into Action Items

Gap Identified	SMART Action Item	Timeline
Missing Data Science Certification	Enroll in Coursera Professional Data Science program	Within 6 months
Lack of Machine Learning Experience	Complete applied ML project with mentor support	Within 12 months
Not perceived as innovative	Publish two problem-solving articles on LinkedIn	Within 12 months
No formal team leadership	Lead cross-functional analytics project	Within 18 months

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Convert these gaps [list] into SMART action items with realistic timelines for the next 12 months."

Appendix C. Career Forecasting Sources and Trends

Forecasting is a vital first step in career planning. While the GAPS model helps you align your abilities with your aspirations, forecasting ensures that those aspirations are grounded in external realities. A clear picture of industry trends, growth sectors, and emerging roles allows you to choose goals that are not only inspiring but also viable.

Key Forecasting Sources

1. **U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)** – Occupational Outlook Handbook with detailed projections
<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>
2. **World Economic Forum – Future of Jobs Report** – Global perspective on disruption and skills
<https://www.weforum.org/reports/future-of-jobs-report>
3. **OECD Skills Outlook** – Workforce transformations and future skills
<https://www.oecd.org/skills/>

4. **LinkedIn Workforce Reports** – Real-time trending skills and roles
<https://economicgraph.linkedin.com/resources/linkedin-workforce-report>
5. **McKinsey & Company – Future of Work** – Research on automation and sector shifts
<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work>

Example Forecast Comparison Table

Source	Highlighted Trend	Example Roles	Implications for Career Planning
BLS	Aging U.S. population	Nurse Practitioners, Home Health Aides	Strong demand for healthcare professionals
WEF	AI and automation	AI Specialists, Data Analysts	Growing need for digital literacy and advanced analytics
OECD	Green transition	Renewable Energy Engineers, Sustainability Experts	Rising opportunities in climate and energy sectors
LinkedIn	Trending skills	UX Design, Cloud Computing, Cybersecurity	Professionals should pursue targeted technical upskilling

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Summarize the latest career growth forecasts from BLS, WEF, and LinkedIn for roles in renewable energy. Show me which skills I should focus on developing in the next 5 years."

Appendix D. References and Further Reading

- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>
- McKinsey & Company. (2024). *The future of work after COVID-19*. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work>
- OECD. (2024). *Skills Outlook 2024*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/skills/>
- World Economic Forum. (2023). *Future of Jobs Report 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/reports/future-of-jobs-report>
- LinkedIn. (2025). *LinkedIn Workforce Report*. LinkedIn Economic Graph. Retrieved from <https://economicgraph.linkedin.com/resources/linkedin-workforce-report>

Additional Suggested Reading:

- Newport, C. (2016). *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*.
- Ibarra, H. (2015). *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*.
- Gratton, L., & Scott, A. (2016). *The 100-Year Life: Living and Working in an Age of Longevity*.

Appendix E. Career Self-Assessment

Appendix E provides a practical framework for evaluating your current career position and identifying areas for growth. By using the self-assessment table below, you can reflect on your strengths and opportunities across technical skills, human skills, and educational achievements. This structured approach will help you gain valuable insights into your professional development

and guide your future career planning. Use the example template as a starting point, or enlist your favorite GenAI to help create a personalized self-assessment that fits your unique career development needs.

Use this table to score yourself across key career dimensions. Rate each category from **0 (lowest)** to **10 (highest)** based on your current situation. Add notes to capture insights or reminders.

Career Skills Self-Assessment

Category	Score (0–10)	Notes / Insights
Technical Skills		e.g., coding, data analysis, clinical expertise
Human Skills		e.g., leadership, communication, adaptability
Education		Highest degree, certifications, ongoing training
Professional Experience		Depth and breadth of relevant work roles
Passions & Interests		How aligned is your current work with what energizes you?
Work Style & Values		Fit with current environment: team vs. solo, structured vs. flexible
Perceptions & Reputation		How do others see you (peer feedback, reviews)?
Industry Standards		Do you meet credential/licensing/benchmark expectations?
Networking & Mentorship		Strength of professional connections and guidance
Life Circumstances		Balance with location, family, finances, and health

How to Use

1. Fill in scores honestly across all categories.
2. Identify the **lowest-rated areas**—these are often the biggest gaps.
3. Compare with your **career goals** to see alignment or disconnects.
4. Carry forward the insights into your **GAPS analysis**.

Suggested GenAI Prompt:

"Help me analyze my career self-assessment: [insert scores]. Which categories are my biggest gaps, and what steps can I take to improve them in the next year?"

Appendix F. Dynamic Resources by Category

Online Learning Platforms

- [Coursera](#) – University- and industry-backed courses; free to audit, paid for certificates
- [edX](#) – Courses from MIT, Harvard, and more; free to access, certificates available
- [LinkedIn Learning](#) – Professional skill-building with short video courses
- FutureLearn – Courses from universities and cultural institutions, with upgrade options
- MIT OpenCourseWare – Free full courses from MIT, including lectures and assignments
- Harvard Online Learning – Free and paid courses across diverse subjects
- Saylor Academy – Free self-paced courses at college and professional levels
- Stanford Online – Free courses and lectures in tech, business, and health
- [Khan Academy](#) – Free lessons in math, science, humanities, and finance for all ages
- OpenLearn – Open University’s free platform for education, health, and technology
- Alison – Free diploma and certificate courses in IT, business, languages, and more
- Codecademy – Introductory coding courses free, with paid upgrades for deeper tracks

Professional Networks & Certification Bodies

- [Project Management Institute \(PMI\)](#) – Global leader in project management certifications (PMP, CAPM, etc.)
- [CFA Institute](#) – Professional body for investment and financial certifications (CFA, CIPM)
- [ESG Institute](#) – Training and certification in environmental, social, and governance reporting
- Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) – Global HR organization with certifications and resources for people management
- American Marketing Association (AMA) – Professional association for marketing and branding leaders
- [Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers \(IEEE\)](#) – Global technical association for engineers, technologists, and innovators
- International Coaching Federation (ICF) – Certification and networking for professional coaches and leadership development specialists
- Association for Financial Professionals (AFP) – Provides training and certifications for corporate finance and treasury professionals
- American Society for Quality (ASQ) – Certification and resources for quality management and process improvement professionals
- Association for Talent Development (ATD) – Global network focused on training, talent development, and learning design

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