How to Articulate Career Goals?

Give details, make the goals credible
Schools want to make sure that you are not an employment risk in any way, i.e., you’ll not struggle to get a job within three months of your graduation.

Why?

Employment statistics carry the most weight in most B-school rankings, and, therefore, a poor performance on this front will make the biggest dent on a school’s ranking.

Poorly articulated career goals may lead credence to employability-risk belief. Poor articulation doesn’t reflect on your employability quotient per se, but it shows lack of clarity in career goals or gap in expectation and reality, which can affect your employability prospects. Moreover, it’s a competitive process and you shouldn’t stand out for lack of clarity and adequate homework.

So, what are the things you need to be mindful of while articulating your career goals?

**Can my career goals be credibly achieved?**

**UCLA Anderson:**

Making a strong case for your future plans requires you to first do research on career paths and find one that resonates. Even if this target will change during business school, your application essays should lay out a clear trajectory for short-term and long-term goals. Do this by demonstrating how you expect to build on skills from your past, and those you expect to gain from the MBA.
Are you aspiring for a huge leap in terms of your post-MBA career goals, something that’s extremely challenging?

If yes, the admission committee is likely to go by preponderance of wide gap between your current experience/ skills and future goals and consider you an employment risk (for your stated career goals), unless you raise their confidence level through details. Few examples:

You are a consultant in Singapore and post-MBA want to start a company in U.S. in an industry in which you’ve some exposure by way of doing few projects. In such a case, stating “… having handled two consulting projects with $100M + revenue companies in data analytics industry, I think I am well placed to start a data analytics company in U.S., post-MBA…” is not enough. Starting a company is no small task, and, therefore, in order to sound credible, you need to show a deeper level of understanding about the industry. You need to ask yourself questions such as “how the U.S. market is different from Singapore market?”, “what are the gaps in the industry in U.S. that you can exploit?”, and “how will you market your product/ service (that’s probably the biggest challenge any startup faces)?” You need not answer every possible question, but you need to let the admission committee know that your understanding of the issues is not superficial.

If you are working in retail banking and want to work in Private Equity (PE) industry post-MBA, then it’s not a credible goal. PE prefers prior experience in the industry or investment banking, and recruits in small numbers mainly from H/ S/ W and to some extent from other top-10 schools with reputation in finance.

If you are a 32-year-old applicant and want to work in Management Consulting or Investment Banking post-MBA - industries known for 90+ (even 100+) hour workweeks, lot of travel (for consulting), and recruiting younger students - then you should strongly articulate why you like the industry and that you’ve had rigorous work life in your current role.
That doesn’t mean that you can’t have an audacious goal. You certainly can. But in such cases, you must articulate very well how you will take that leap.

For less audacious jumps, though, you may not need to have such a strong connect with your past work history. For example, if you’re planning to switch from a role in operations in manufacturing industry to that of a management consultant, it’s suffice to show your interest in consulting industry, as such transitions are common.

To cap this section, here are few more examples of career goals:

“… In my career, I have moved from niche to mainstream consulting and post-MBA I would like to work in a management consulting firm in the US to imbibe different business practices. In the long term, I see myself in a senior role in the consulting industry in India working on transformation of distressed companies.”

Comments: There is no apparent reason provided for ‘transformation of distressed companies’ as the long-term goal, which makes it look like copy-paste from somewhere else or lack of application of mind. Such specificity about the long-term goal looks credible only if you have very strong reasons for it.

“Having gained insights on the technical side of CRM, I want to pursue the business side as a CRM consultant, post-MBA. And in the medium term, I want to start my own boutique CRM consulting firm servicing clients in the emerging markets of Asia and Africa who can ill-afford large consulting firms. Customer expectation in these markets is growing, and hence these potential clients need more professional systems for managing their customers.”

Comments: This looks oft-beaten, trite (moving from technical to business side) career goal. If you want to pull it off that way, show reasons why you are interested in the business side, and why you want to stay in the CRM domain, quite a niche space. Also, starting a company isn’t child’s play. Therefore, your explanation for doing so should be strongly backed by understanding of the industry, as has been done in the example on (entrepreneurship in the energy industry) page 6.

“Numerous resources to support entrepreneurship at the Entrepreneurship Club and the Entrepreneurship Conference at HBS will assist me in understanding the nuances of starting my
own venture [consulting in a niche space] in the long term. I will get an opportunity to participate in business plan competitions, interact with VCs and successful entrepreneurs, and learn how to pitch a business idea to raise capital.”

**Comments:** Well, consulting business typically doesn’t require raising capital, and it’s not an industry that attracts VCs. Therefore, this argument shows lack of understanding of these issues.

**Am I specific about my career goals?**

OK, your career goals seem credible. What else?

You need to be specific about your *post-MBA* career goals. Example:

“Post-MBA, I want to work in consulting.”

“To achieve this vision [long-term goal], post-MBA I plan to work in a large consulting firm in Singapore to have a better understanding of the industry in the region.”

**Comments:** The first response is general, and hence poor. It tells the reviewer that you haven’t given much thought to your career goals. Second is more specific in mentioning your interest in pursuing consulting industry post-MBA.

Another example:

“After working in a boutique consulting firm for 3-4 years, I’ll take the entrepreneurial route and pursue my two dream projects – ABC and XYZ.”

**Comments:** Mentioning two goals and that too entrepreneurial tells the admission committee that you don’t know how challenging it is to handle even one entrepreneurial project. Moreover, lack of clarity (two goals) doesn’t show the applicant in good light.
Two more points on career goals

First, some essay prompts ask just your career goals, whereas others ask both short-term (immediately after completing your MBA) and long-term goals. In both the cases, cover short-term as well as long-term goals.

Second, short-term goals, because they are not too distant, need to be more specific than long-term. However, long-term goals should ideally build upon your previous experiences, including post-MBA experience. For example:

In the short term, I would like to leverage my nearly five years of experience in oil fields and work as an Energy Consultant with a specialized consulting firm like Schlumberger. The role will not only add managerial skills to my existing technical skills, but also build the network in the industry, so crucial for my long term goal.

After working for 3-4 years as Energy Consultant, I would like to start a service company – my long term goal - providing completion services (required for making an oil well ready for production) to oil companies in India. This is a niche segment within the oil service industry with relatively less competition and requirement of capital, and hence an entry point for me. I can leverage my network in the industry in India to build the initial traction. Given the energy requirement and the oil resources in India, there is tremendous scope for such service companies in the coming years.

Comments: The long-term goal, though challenging, looks credible, as the applicant aspires to build upon his current experience and short-term role. Moreover, the applicant has shown understanding of complex issues concerning his long-term goal.