

# How-to Guide: Career Trajectory Use Career Ladders to Map Paths for Advancement

Insights to Action is a suite of resources meant to help state and local public health agencies improve recruitment and retention by acting on their data from the Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS). Find more tools like this at <http://debeaumont.org/programs/insights-to-action/>.

Retaining high-performing employees is critical to a strong public health workforce. The 2024 Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) found that 40% of employees considering leaving in the next year cited lack of opportunities to advance as the reason (53% among those 35 or under). Thirty-five percent of employees said opportunities outside the agency were a consideration for leaving (51% among those 35 or under).

Forty-one percent of employees age 35 or under cited potential for career advancement as a reason they decided to work in government public health. However, not every public health worker will advance in their career the way they want to. Among employees age 35 or under, 41% report that they do not have, or are unsure of whether they have, pathways to develop towards other roles or responsibilities.

By investing in tools like career ladders, agencies can validate these employees' motivations for joining public health and provide clearer pathways for growth. Organizations, supervisors, and employees each have a role to play in ensuring workers have opportunities to grow and progress.

The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS), conducted in 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2024, supports the government public health workforce by measuring strengths and gaps to inform future investments in funding, training, recruitment, and retention.



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## How career ladders can help

Career ladders are a tool public health leaders can use to help workers envision the next steps in their careers. They help employees understand the skills, training, and experience that will best prepare and position them to reach their goals.

Public health workers can use career ladders to evaluate their skills and experience, identify gaps, and seek training, assignments, and challenges that help boost their qualifications. Defined paths also motivate workers to discover and consider new roles within their organization.

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## How do career ladders work?

Career ladders map the progression an employee might follow along a specific job path within an organization, from the entry-level position to the highest-ranking role. Each position is a “rung” on the ladder, with its own competency and experience requirements.

### Career ladder benefits

Career ladders bring transparency to public health roles and to the training and competencies needed to advance. This transparency helps improve recruitment and retention and strengthens agency pipelines for effective succession planning.

### Career ladder challenges

Career ladders are not universal – career progressions differ in every agency. It’s important to manage employee expectations when using these tools. Public health leaders must reinforce that meeting requirements for the next position on the ladder doesn’t guarantee advancement to that position. Budget constraints, braided funding, and an aging public health workforce all affect the availability of positions for internal promotions.

It’s also important to note that not all public health agencies have control over their agency’s human resource functions. When human resource functions are centralized, career ladders must be designed to work within existing positional and salary structures and within civil service classifications.

Public health agencies operating with centralized human resources may still find value in using career ladders. These tools can help guide agency workforce development and retention efforts. Career ladders provide employees with access to transparent information about the education, skills, and competencies needed to advance to higher-level roles. These tools can also inform the agency’s investments in training, mentoring, and other workforce development programs. Successful implementation of career ladders requires coordination and cooperation with centralized HR leads. See [When HR is Centralized: How to Talk About Career Ladders](#) for guidance on career ladders conversations with your external human resources team.

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## Getting started with career ladders

If your organization is new to career ladders, a small pilot program can help you develop and implement these tools. Here are some key actions to consider:

### Start with why

Begin by evaluating how career ladders could serve your organization. Consider how they may help:

- Retain high-performing public health workers
- Encourage new workers to join your organization
- Plan for role succession as employees retire
- Ensure equitable access to advancement opportunities

A clear vision for how you expect to use these tools helps ensure their effectiveness. Outlining their potential benefits can also help you obtain the support of leadership and employees.

### Limit scope and seek input

Developing multiple career ladders at once may be challenging. Keep the task manageable by starting in the areas of most critical need for your agency. As appropriate, seek input and feedback from:

- Current public health staff
- Employee resource groups
- Union representatives
- Community partners, academic advisors, and professional organizations

Launching with a few targeted career ladders lets you gather feedback and adjust your approach if needed.

### Identify and assess career progressions

Review job classifications in the program area for which you want to create a career ladder, including all entry-level, specialist, supervisor, and leadership positions. Draw connections and identify opportunities for individuals to move from one role to another. Consider adding or changing roles to facilitate progressions where feasible.

### Document requirements to create rungs

After shaping a career ladder's progression, add details for each rung. For each position on the ladder, include:

- Job descriptions and pay ranges
- Required competencies
- Education, training, and certifications needed

These details help public health workers understand the skills and experience they need to advance. They can also help supervisors determine an employee's readiness for promotion.

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## Link ladders to training opportunities

Consider the training and professional development opportunities available to employees in your agency. For each rung, you may choose to include:

- Skill-based training opportunities, such as budgeting or quality improvement
- Formal professional development programs
- Mentoring programs
- Coaching
- Internships

Showing how available training opportunities tie into positions on the ladder can help improve its usefulness. For example, 22% of employees age 35 or under reported having completed an internship at a government public health agency during their education. This suggests internships are a meaningful entry point into the workforce, while also highlighting an opportunity to grow these programs.

## Foster equitable opportunities

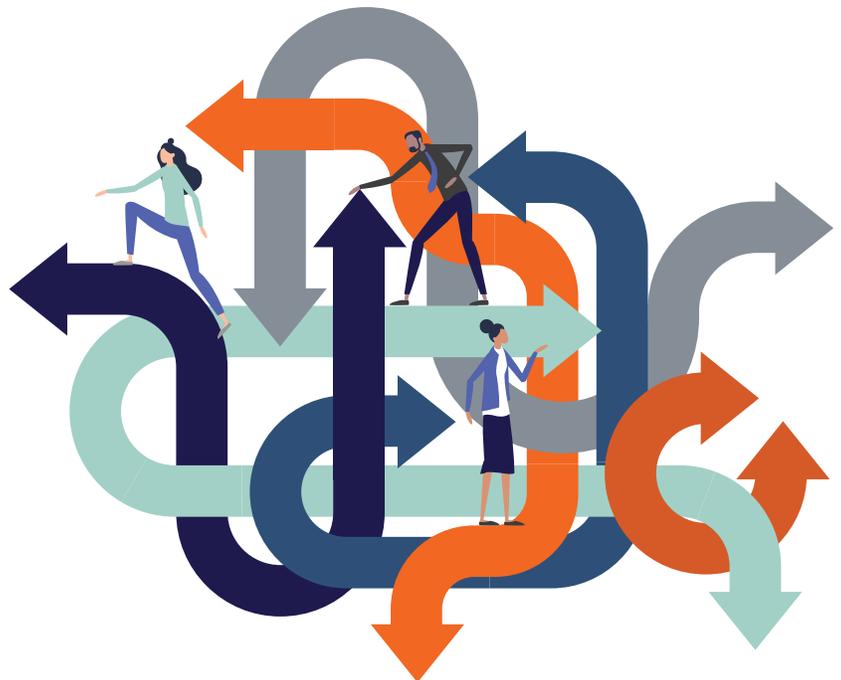
Not every employee has access to academic degrees or training opportunities. According to [PH WINS 2024](#), a majority of the government public health workforce (65%) has a bachelor's degree or less, and only 22% have a degree in public health. When possible, include milestones and performance metrics that are not specifically tied to degrees or training, such as lived experiences or demonstrated competencies.

Sixty-one percent of employees age 35 or under who were in the workforce six months before beginning their current roles were working outside of public health, bringing experience from other sectors into government public health. Job descriptions that include language such as "any combination of education and experience that is substantially equivalent" to a specific degree can help create flexibility for employees to advance.

## Broaden opportunities with career lattices

Career lattices – paths that focus on multidirectional movement – offer alternative opportunities to departmental or divisional ascension and can help public health workers gain new skills and experiences. Individuals may move between programs to find opportunities or build competencies. Employees may also move laterally to deepen subject matter expertise.

It's important to remember that not all employees want to ascend a supervisory ladder. Some may wish to master specific skills, such as direct care. Career lattices complement individualized professional development approaches that let employees follow their interests and prevent career stagnation.



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## Launch your career ladders

Creating career ladders in your public health agency may also create employee expectations. Consider providing talking points for supervisors to use with employees about the purpose of these tools. While career ladders can encourage intentionality in an employee's professional development, meeting the requirements of a specific position is never a guarantee that the position will be available or offered. A position must be open, and budgets must support the movement of an employee who has completed a ladder rung into the next position.

## Reflect, review, and adjust

Your agency's personnel needs and requirements will change over time. Create a career ladders maintenance schedule to ensure these tools are reviewed regularly and are updated to reflect your organization's current needs.

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## Beyond career ladders

Organizations, supervisors, and individuals each have a role to play in employee career advancement. Here are some key actions to help ensure all workers in your agency have opportunities to grow in their careers:

### Actions for public health agencies

Public health agencies can help all workers thrive by making advancement information transparent and supporting employees in advancing upward or laterally. Staff input can help identify common training and development needs across the organization.

#### Agency leadership can:

- Implement policies that encourage career development conversations, such as including career goals in performance reviews and mandating protected time for employee learning.
- Train supervisors in coaching and feedback skills.
- Require all employees to complete individual development plans and encourage supervisors to link team member career goals to agency competencies, equity goals, and succession planning.
- Partner with training providers to offer skills-based training and leadership development programs that align with advancement pathways.

### Actions for public health supervisors

Supervisors may have complex feelings when employees wish to advance. Encouraging a high-performing team member to move up and potentially off your team can be hard. Scripts to guide conversations about employee interests, strengths, and values can help supervisors navigate these situations.

#### Supervisors can:

- Offer stretch assignments and connect current projects to future career goals to help prepare employees for advancement.
- Monitor which employees get development opportunities and encourage all team members to take on special projects and acting roles to help ensure equitable access.
- Have regular conversations with team members about building skills and career goals.

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## Actions for public health workers

Individuals have an important role in shaping their career trajectory. Self-assessment tools help identify strengths and gaps and assist with developing career goals.

### Public health workers can:

- Review the agency's organizational chart to learn about existing roles.
- Reach out to colleagues they admire for informational interviews.
- Build their network and participate in mentoring programs.
- Track their achievements, projects, and skills over time.
- Talk to their supervisor about long-term goals, training opportunities, and open roles.
- Explore volunteer service in their local community or consider serving on a board or committee to help build valuable skills and relationships.

A rewarding career in public health looks different for each of us. While no two paths are the same, meaningful opportunities to grow, engage, and connect remain the cornerstone of career satisfaction.

## When HR is Centralized: How to Talk About Career Ladders

If human resources (HR) is a centralized function in your municipality or state, the process of developing and implementing career ladders for your public health agency may face some hurdles. Approaching HR with a partnership mindset can help ease objections and foster collaboration. Consider this framework for a productive conversation:

**Bring a sample ladder:** Create a sample ladder with input from agency staff and stakeholders to demonstrate the usefulness of these tools. Tie roles to existing job classifications to help reduce friction related to reclassifying positions. Consider starting with a critical need or hard-to-fill position to show how career ladders can create internal candidate pipelines that benefit HR. **What to say:** "We've incorporated feedback from our agency experts and stakeholders to develop a ladder that internal candidates seeking promotions can follow to help ensure they're qualified for their next position. I welcome your feedback on how this tool may be helpful to HR when filling agency positions, as well as any concerns you may have."

**Arm yourself with data:** Use **PH WINS** data or learnings from agency exit interviews to demonstrate how lack of visibility around advancement opportunities impacts employee retention. **What to say:** "We know that employees in our agency tend to move on when they can't see a path to advancement or identify opportunities for personal and professional growth. I'd like to show you what we've learned through examining the data."

**Highlight collective benefits:** Talk with HR leads about the mutual benefits of career ladders, including preparing internal candidates for new roles. Access to a pipeline of qualified internal candidates means HR can fill positions faster and help control recruiting and training costs while your agency can retain skilled employees with institutional knowledge. **What to say:** "We recognize how challenging it can be to fill some of the roles in our agency, especially in areas of critical need. We'd like to talk about how implementing career ladders can help identify qualified internal candidates to help reduce recruiting time and costs."

**Demonstrate understanding through common language:** Align career ladder rungs with HR's minimum qualifications, classification requirements, and examinations and certifications to make it easier for HR to recognize employees who complete the ladder as qualified candidates. **What to say:** "We think career ladders can serve as both an agency training roadmap and as a tool for HR to quickly identify qualified internal candidates who meet designated benchmarks for open positions."

**Suggest a follow-up cadence:** Schedule regular check-ins with HR to monitor metrics such as internal promotions, employee retention rates, and employee satisfaction. Use these data to refine career ladders and better align with HR processes. **What to say:** "As we launch these tools, it's important to touch base and make sure they're mutually beneficial. What timeline would work for you to check in on the metrics we're seeing as a result of implementing career ladders, identify any needed adjustments to ladders, and determine which new career ladders might be useful?"

Centralized HR functions may leave public health agencies with less flexibility in developing and implementing career ladders, but these tools still offer value. Talk with your HR team to assess how career ladders can help meet mutual needs and objectives.

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## Resource: Career Ladder Template

### How to build a career ladder

Career ladders are unique to, and responsive to the needs of, specific public health agencies. But there are some common elements to consider when creating career ladders. These include:

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- 01 Career track title and job classification (for example, nutritionist or epidemiologist)
  - 02 Position names and levels within the job classification (for example, entry level, intermediate, supervisory, etc.)
  - 03 Position summaries that include each role's contribution and high-level functions
  - 04 Minimum qualifications, education, and experience for each position on the ladder, including experience bands (for example, 0 to 3 years, 3 to 5 years, etc.)
  - 05 Required competencies and certifications for each position on the ladder
  - 06 High-level compensation for each position on the ladder (such as a salary range or agency pay grade)
  - 07 Specific criteria, including any documentation, required to advance
  - 08 A general reminder that completing all requirements for a position does not guarantee position availability or an employee's advancement to that position

### Sources:

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11630342/>

<https://chwtraining.org/chw-career-development/>

de Beaumont Foundation and Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey Data Dashboard. July 2025.

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## Resource: Self-reflection Tool

This worksheet is an example of a tool supervisors can provide to employees to encourage career reflection and guide professional growth discussions.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

### Your Current Role

Answer these questions to reflect on your current role:

- What do you like most about your current position?
- What skills have you been able to use or develop in this role?
- If you could change anything about your current role, what would you change?

### Your Strengths and Competencies

Answer these questions to help identify your strengths and where you shine:

- What are your top three skills or strengths?
- What professional strengths do your colleagues and managers rely on you for?
- Which core public health competencies do you demonstrate in your current role?

### Your Areas for Growth

Answer these questions to help identify where you can strengthen your skills:

- Are there skills or competencies that you feel you could improve or wish you had?
- What challenges you most in your current role?
- What feedback have you heard from colleagues, supervisors, or mentors about areas for improvement?

### Your Interests and Career Vision

Answer these questions to reflect on your public health career interests:

- What public health program areas, populations, or public health issues do you find most interesting?
- Who are the people you admire most in this agency?
- What would an ideal workday or work week in public health look like for you? What would you be doing and who would you be interacting with?

### Your Next Steps

Answer these questions to help you consider the next steps you can take to grow in your public health career:

- Was there anything you learned that surprised you when you answered these questions?
- What information do you still need to determine your next career goal?
- Who could you connect with to learn more about your next career goal and the steps you can take to help you achieve it?