



# SWOT Assessment

**Organize a current state analysis to  
build a strategic plan.**

In this guide, we will cover:

- ◆ Purpose and Use of SWOT
- ◆ Tips for a Comprehensive Analysis
- ◆ Evolving from SWOT Analysis to Action
- ◆ A Canvas to Create a SWOT

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# Introduction

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## What Makes a SWOT Powerful?

SWOT assessments are intended to help organizations gain a clear understanding of the current state, determine where to go next, and inform the strategic actions that can be taken to achieve the future state.

A good SWOT synthesizes and organizes both data (objective) and expert insights (subjective) that summarize the current state. Like any planning tool, a SWOT is only as good as the information it contains—it is crucial to engage multiple levels of the organization beyond the leadership team to gain a clear understanding of the current state, and source ideas for opportunities that help develop the future state.

SWOT assessments will fail if they do not consider three critical areas:

- 1. How to succeed, and why?**
- 2. What growth opportunities exist, and why?**
- 3. How to serve our customers better, and why?**

# Tips for Building a Comprehensive Analysis

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## Building a SWOT

### Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths and weaknesses reflect **internal** dynamics that can be controlled by the organization. When identifying strengths and weaknesses, it is equally important to consider internal factors that will meaningfully assist the organization in meeting customer needs (such as customer service) as it is to consider current markets' and customers' needs or wants that are within your control.

As a general rule, **strengths** are particularly meaningful when they assist the organization in meeting customer needs; and **weaknesses** that deserve to be in your SWOT include those variables that may not be directly apparent to your customers, but do negatively affect the experience customers have with your organization (e.g., relying on one vendor means your organization has too little control over price of your product).

#### ***Some key questions to ask when determining strengths and weaknesses:***

- What does the organization do best?
- What are the organization's functional capabilities?
- What unique resources or capabilities does the organization have now, and what does it lack?

## Opportunities & Threats

Opportunities and threats are **external** to the organization—these are things that can be influenced, but not completely controlled. These two areas capture both present and anticipated conditions that will affect the organization.

Opportunities are conditions in the organization's favor that, if acted upon, could produce rewards. Think of opportunities in terms of current and new: what current markets could be penetrated more deeply, and what new markets could be waded into?

Threats are barriers that may prevent the organization from reaching the desired rewards. Consider threats in terms of both social, technical, economic, and political factors, as well as threats from competitors.

### *Some key questions to ask when determining opportunities and threats:*

- ◆ **Customers:** Who are they, what motivates them, and what are their unmet needs? What can the organization do (that it isn't currently) to fulfill those needs? What untapped customers exist in the market? Do competitors have dissatisfied customers that the organization could serve better?
- ◆ **Competitors:** What are their strengths (threats) and weaknesses (opportunities)? What strategies and structures do competitors employ? And what kind of image do they cultivate? How might these elements present a threat or opportunities to your organization?
- ◆ **The Market:** What is the overall size of the current market and is there projected growth? Is the distribution system optimized?
- ◆ **Your Environment:** What technological, governmental, economic, or cultural disruptions would most impact the organization? How can these uncertainties be strategically addressed?

## Tips for Building an Effective SWOT

- 1. Use data wherever possible instead of relying only on opinions.**  
Consider listing the current data gathered, delegating responsibility for gathering additional data and populating the SWOT with “what the data tells you.”
- 2. Write more than a word or two for the strength, weakness, opportunity, or threat.** Use adjectives and descriptive nouns so that the planning team understands the context; e.g., instead of “recruiting” as a weakness, write as, “Time to fill vacant positions is 3 months.”
- 3. SWOT entries should lead to an action.** If the energy is taken to add something to the SWOT, consider the “so, what?” Is it something that can be leveraged and acted on, or if it needs to be addressed, would it make a difference? If not, no need to include it in your SWOT.
- 4. Identifying internal opportunities in the Opportunities section makes the assessment fall apart.** If internal opportunities **MUST** be identified (such as developing career paths for employees, procuring a new software, etc.), sort the opportunities into two buckets: internal and external.
- 5.** If it is difficult to determine if something is an internal state (strength/weakness) or an external state (opportunity/threat), ask the question: **Would this issue exist if the company did not exist? If the answer is yes, it should be considered external.**
- 6. Engage multiple levels of the organization in brainstorming to source great ideas.** Build the SWOT with input beyond the executive team. Engaging managers and front-line staff in the process is critical to gaining a comprehensive assessment of the current state.

# Evolving from Analysis to Action

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## So, What Next?

### Evolving the SWOT Assessment

Your organization has finished building a SWOT assessment... now what? The most common mistake is not putting the SWOT to use. Once the SWOT assessment is completed, with input from different levels of the organization, take these steps to evolve it into actionable work:

- 1. Group strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, within their respective quadrants.** Determine themes and similar topics until there is a list of high-focus areas within each quadrant.
- 2. Sort the themes into “priority areas”—**growth, productivity, and skills development, for example. Perhaps the SWOT’s themes fall into the balanced scorecard perspectives (financial, customer/market growth, operational excellence/productivity, people & learning).
- 3. Turn the themes into SMART goals with a label + a verb + a descriptive outcome.** (Alternatively, you can develop objectives and key results from the SWOT assessment. See our [OKR whitepaper here.](#))

## Synthesize Your SWOT Assessment

The purpose of a SWOT assessment is to identify high-leverage areas for exercises later in the planning process, and some areas will eventually become goals in the strategic plan. The four quadrants produce the basis of content that informs the rest of the planning process:

**Strengths:** Strengths identify what the organization is doing better than competitors. Leverage strengths for the “how to win” section of your [growth strategy](#) by identifying competitive advantages from within the organization’s strengths (and no, not every strength is a competitive advantage that is a true differentiator, that customers care about and that is hard to imitate).

**Weaknesses:** Weaknesses are the areas currently holding the organization back and call out the work that must be done to improve the current state. Since the organization controls the weaknesses, you can easily turn them into goals when drafting your strategic plan.

**Opportunities:** Opportunities are great fodder for “where to play” in a growth strategy. They provide insights for new markets or customers to pursue. From the opportunities, identify the potential, and prioritize and choose the existing/new markets or customer segments to expand/enter into.

**Threats:** Threats are similar to weaknesses, but it’s crucial to be choosy when turning threats into goals. Unlike weaknesses, the organization cannot control threats—they can only be mitigated. Which are the most important threats to mitigate and you can feasibly affect?

# SWOT Assessment

Org Name:

Date:

You must to answer these two core questions:

1. What growth opportunities exist, and why?
2. How do we serve our customers better, and why?

## Internal

## External

*Consider functional capabilities that are strengths.*

*What unique resources or capabilities does the organization have now (strengths)?*

*What unique resources or capabilities does the organization lack (weaknesses)?*

1

### Strengths

EX. Channel partner program is increasingly successful in reaching new markets

3

### Opportunities

Complete both internal and external opportunities.

Internal:

External

*What opportunities does the organization have that will benefit customers; where can the organization find new/more customers?*

*What are competitors weaknesses (opportunities)?*

2

### Weaknesses

EX. Time to fill open positions is 3 months

3

### Threats

What external threats must you mitigate?

*What technological, governmental, economic, or cultural disruptions could impact the organization?*



# SWOT Assessment

Org Name:

Dates:

You must to answer these two core questions:

1. What growth opportunities exist, and why?
2. How do we serve our customers better, and why?

## 5 Competitive Advantages

Strengths identified in the SWOT assessment are potential competitive advantages. To determine if a strength is a competitive advantage, answer the questions:

1. **Differentiator:** Is this strength defensible?
2. **Client Value:** Do clients value this strength?
3. **Unique:** Is this strength difficult for your current or future competitors to imitate?

If the answers to these three questions are all Yes, then you have identified your competitive advantage(s). OPTIONAL: Discuss/decide if any strengths with a No or Sometimes should be made into a definitive yes—what has to be shifted to become a competitive advantage? These should be goals or initiatives in your plan.

Strengths	Differentiator?			Client Value?			Hard to Imitate?		
	Yes	Sometimes	No	Yes	Sometimes	No	Yes	Sometimes	No

## 6 Theme Your WOTs

The next step is to synthesize themes in Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats sections of your SWOT assessment. To complete the grid below, group similar ideas within each of these three quadrants. These high-level themes will turn into the labels for goals in the following section of the worksheet.

Weakness Themes	Opportunity Themes	Threat Themes
EX. Recruiting		

## 7 Develop Goals

To take the SWOT assessment from analysis to action, the themes above must be developed into goals. A good goal should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Responsible and Timebound. Goals should follow this structure - **LABEL: Verb + descriptive outcome**

In the table below, enter the Weakness, Opportunity & Threat themes (identified in the section above) in the "label" column. Then, refer to your SWOT assessment to develop 1-3 SMART goals.

Label <THEME>	Goals <Verb + Descriptive Outcome>
EX. RECRUITING	Develop detailed job descriptions for every role in the organization by the end of Q3.



We build and review thousands of strategic plans every year. We'd love to review and provide you feedback on your SWOT and Goals!

[Contact us here.](#) Or call us at 775-747-7407.

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