



Pay Attention to Your Record!

I am having trouble today with coherent thoughts and staying focused because tomorrow I leave on a motorcycle trip across Europe. Today I am mostly daydreaming about flying into Frankfurt and riding through the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Austria, Czech Republic, and back into Germany. I have hotel rooms for the first three nights, and then I am going to, as pilots say, “wing it.” I am very excited about seeing the beauty of Europe and riding through the countryside. I know that paying attention to driving details while enjoying the sights is going to be a challenge.

Speaking of paying attention to details, I want to address the younger early career science and engineering professionals: please pay attention to your career record! In the past month, I have reviewed a number of our scientists and engineers for promotion. Whether you are going up for promotion in a laboratory, academics, or (to a lesser extent) industry, your record plays a major role in promotions consideration. It not only affects your promotion potential, but your record is also a major asset when applying for a new job. In my opinion, our younger and even midlevel scientists and engineers are not taking the effort to ensure their record is competitive before being considered for promotion or obtaining a better position.

So what am I talking about? When I review a nominee’s record for a potential promotion, I immediately look at the last five years. Has the person been active or have they retired in their last position? Have they published in journals and have they participated in conferences? Have they briefed high-level officials, and have they secured their own funding? Has their participation in societies been increasing in importance (session chair, program committee, board participation, etc.)? Have they been elevated to Senior Member and/or Fellow? Have they taken on additional collateral duties, such as invention evaluation boards, curriculum committees, and search committees, while maintaining good performance in their primary job? What is the significance of their awards?

The activities above are not usually associated with a scientist’s or engineer’s primary job, and so they often quickly move to the bottom of the priority list. However, one realizes their importance when looking for a new job or being considered for promotion. I have seen too many really great scientists and engineers not secure the job or promotion based on lack of attention to their record.

Here’s my advice: continue to publish both journal papers and conference papers each year if it is possible (some jobs prohibit this). A good target is two journal papers a year and one or two conference papers a year. Ask to be considered for program committee membership or session chair at your primary conference. If given the opportunity, brief your work at the highest level possible (corporate VP, military flag or senior executive level, or academic committee). Pay attention to your proposal and funding record. Showing you can attract research funding can be key in considerations. Always ask your senior colleagues if they need help in hosting events. When SPIE or another organization asks if you want to participate on an award board or other activities, volunteer. These activities take additional effort, but your participation will be worthwhile, appreciated, and will pay off in securing a new job or when being considered for promotion.

Your record can be thought of as a checklist on a path to where you are going, so you can just keep checking things off on your journey. Don’t ignore this checklist, and your journey will be more enjoyable with more opportunities. With regard to journeys, I rode my motorcycle across the United States two years ago. I could not believe how beautiful the country was and how interesting the different regions were. There was one area in southern Utah where the highway exits were 140 miles apart. My motorcycle had a range of 150 miles, so I would get nervous when the “almost empty” light came on. Paying attention to the gas record paid off more than you can imagine!

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Editor