How to Get Promoted: Planning for Career Growth
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ABSTRACT

Are you stuck in what feels like a dead-end job? Did someone else get the promotion that you felt you deserved? Are you plagued with boring tasks and looking for something more challenging? Is your current management seemingly unaware of skills that you have that could contribute to the department? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, read on for some tips that might help you grow in your career.

As we spend more time in the field of SAS® programming, we move from performing straightforward tasks under direct supervision of others, to working alone on a big chunk of work, to tackling more complex tasks, to supervising other programmers, and so on. As we gain experience and skills, we expect to be promoted up the line, accepting more responsibility in exchange for higher pay and a loftier title.

But promotions are usually not given as a reward for doing things well, or for sticking around a long time. Instead, promotions are a way of filling a particular need of the company. As companies grow and/or people leave, positions open up. If the work load never changed and no one ever left a company, promotions would never happen! So getting promoted is really about planning ahead, transforming yourself into the best candidate for a future position.

DISQUALIFYING STATEMENT

This paper represents my own personal opinions. By figuring out these guidelines, sometimes the “hard way”, I have been able to do quite well in my career. These suggestions do not guarantee success, nor are they officially sanctioned by the company where I am presently working or at any company where I have previously worked.

INTRODUCTION

I believe that preparation is the key to a promotion. One of the ways we can prepare is by excelling in our current role. This includes technical skills, plus “soft” skills like communication and networking. Some of these we probably already know how to do, but I’ll offer some pointers that programmers may not have considered.

Another important preparation technique involves identifying a future position and putting together some plans to get there. This topic is a bit more nebulous, and can be daunting to us programmers. I’ve included some advice on how to figure out what that next role is, how to demonstrate readiness for it, plus some warnings to consider.

OUR CURRENT ROLE

Do the Job Well

First and foremost a programmer must do his or her current job well to be considered for a promotion. After all, how can we be promoted to a new job if we haven’t demonstrated competence in the current one? This includes following all company and department SOPs, guidelines and other policies. I wrote a paper called “Writing Code that Lasts” for SUGI 2004 that contains many tips on how to excel in the technical side of our job, and I will not go into those details again here.

We should get a copy of our job description plus look through annual reviews to make sure we’re meeting or exceeding expectations. These will give us some ideas on where to focus our energy for improvement in our current position.
Also keep in mind that we can’t get moved away from our current job if nobody else can do it. To avoid this situation, we need to write clear code and provide appropriate documentation so that others can easily work with it.

**Practice Good Manners**

Good manners can go a long way. Treat others respectfully and with tact. Volunteer compliments, both in public and in private. Others like to be appreciated for their efforts, and to know what they’re doing well. Just be sure to be honest: no one likes a suck-up!

With criticisms be discreet and to the point. For example, instead of announcing to friends in the department

> “Sue is such a bad programmer. Her code is totally wrong and she has no idea what she’s doing!”

we should tell Sue

> “Based on the code I reviewed, it seems you’re unfamiliar with PROC LIFETEST. Here are some resources for you…”

Sue is likely to appreciate our helpful advice and the fact that we’re not playing the role of “tattletale” to the manager, will hopefully use this advice to grow as a programmer, and help keep her from becoming defensive in the future when discussing her code with others.

Usually it’s better to initially discuss issues with the individual and avoid bringing in management. Sometimes we must offer criticisms of another employee to management, and in this event we should do so in private and stick to the facts.

**Handle the Bad**

Before running to our manager with complaints and problems, first give some thought to solutions. We should enter our manager’s office not only with what’s wrong, but at least one idea for how to fix it. For example, instead of saying

> “That vendor never does what I tell them to do!”

we could say

> “Our vendor doesn’t seem to understand my requests. I send them via email, but do you think it might be a better idea if I scheduled regular telecons instead?”

Our manager won’t always use one of our solutions, but might be able to build off of them.

We also need to deal with bad news of expected delays to the project. We may be tempted to put off letting others know that we’re behind on our project, hoping that things will eventually work out. It’s better to warn our manager and project lead early on of any potential delays because often they can help us overcome them. With warning, our manager or project lead might be able to shift us resources, reprioritize workloads, or authorize overtime pay. The sooner they know about potential delays, the more help they can be. We all know that when we’re in the middle of a crunch, adding new people to the team often doesn’t help because they don’t know what to do and we don’t have time to train them; but if those same people were added earlier on, it might have made all the difference. Finally, it makes our manager or project lead look bad if they can’t deliver on time, so we want to do what we can to help them and prevent surprises.

Another “bad” that we need to handle is our own mistakes. Face it, we all make them. But blaming others doesn’t really make us look good. Instead accept the responsibility, plus also include some steps we’ve taken to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. For example, we could say

> “I got wrapped up in my work and completely forgot about the meeting this morning. I will now keep my electronic calendar open all the time with the alert feature on, so the alarm will sound and remind me when it’s time for a meeting.”
By owning up to our mistakes, we are seen as responsible and trustworthy.

Managers value employees who make their job easier, and we can do this by helping them find solutions and meet their goals.

**Make Ourselves Visible**

Does it seem that one programmer in our group always gets the most interesting projects and is even recognized in the hallway by senior management? This programmer has become “visible”.

Programmers often assume the quiet, technical, heads-down role. We keep our office doors closed because we need to concentrate on our work. Because of this we’re often not included in cross-functional team meetings or celebrations, and sometimes those in other groups that we work with don’t even know our names. It’s hard to get promoted or be given interesting tasks to do when no one knows who we are!

There are many ways to make ourselves more visible. Within our own programming department we can offer to mentor new employees; organize staff meetings; and volunteer to take on projects outside the normal scope of the job, such as testing a new application or writing text for a user manual. We can give presentations at in-house or user group meetings. Industry groups like WUSS are always eager for our help, and companies are usually pretty good about allowing their employees to devote time to them because it gets the company name out there and can help with recruiting.

On the job, we need to make sure people know who we are and what we do. For those of us who are shy, especially in groups, prepare to speak up in meetings by reading through the agenda ahead of time and noting a few contributions to make.

Outside of meetings, put forth an effort to engage in conversations with our managers and coworkers from other functional areas. For example, we might occasionally wander by their office on the way to lunch and ask them to join us. The nice thing about lunchtime conversations is that they don’t need to be work-related; we can chat about our children, pets, the commute, schooling, or anything else we find in common outside of work. Use it as an opportunity to build a relationship.

**Network**

We’ve all heard the term “networking”, but it seems to be a skill better practiced by those in marketing than us in programming. As “techies”, social skills may not be our forte. To network, we have to make an effort to keep in touch with people in the industry. Our network will likely include current and former coworkers and bosses, fellow students and instructors from school, plus people we meet at user group meetings and conferences. We often tend to think of our network only when we’re looking for a job, but there are actually other times we can take advantage of it.

Networking allows us opportunities to test out our ideas before bringing them up to our managers or others in the department. For example, before suggesting that we change our standard programs to use mostly PROC SQL, we should run it by a few others first to get their opinions. We will likely find additional reasons why it’s a good idea, plus we can prepare for any criticisms. Sometimes we may even find out our great plan wasn’t so great after all, and we’re thankful to have discovered that before making a proposal to the boss!

Another time that a good network is useful is when our company is looking to hire a new employee or bring in a new contractor. Think about people in our network and who might be a good fit for this position. Hiring provides an incredible opportunity to shape the group we work with, and we should take advantage of it. I once helped a former manager get a short-term contracting position where I was working; not only did he end up working there, with me in a more senior position than him, but we now use each other as references!
**Keep Track of Our Accomplishments**

How many times do we get to our annual review and can’t remember what we’ve accomplished? Sure, the last few weeks or even months are pretty fresh in our minds, but it starts to get fuzzy beyond that. Now imagine how difficult it is for a manager to remember what all of their direct reports have done over that same year! Some managers are better than others at keeping track of these things, but my advice here is that we each keep our own records. We might do this by keeping a hand-written list in our calendar, an electronic list on our desktop, etc. The method itself isn’t important, just that we keep it somewhere in the front of our minds so we remember to update it. This way when our annual review comes along, we can readily remind our manager of all we’ve done.

Another way to track the more major of our accomplishments is to continually update that resume/CV. Every couple months we should open it up, read through it, and add any new skills, roles, responsibilities, and courses taken. Whenever I present a paper at a conference, I add that in. At my company they ask for an updated resume once a year, so my manager always has a relatively current version. We should consider passing it along to our manager even if not asked, especially when our manager seems to be unaware of some skills we have. Many of us are now working for someone other than who hired us at our present company, and our current manager may never have seen our resume. What better way to convey the breadth of our experience than our own resume/CV?

**OUR NEXT ROLE**

**Research**

Since probably grade school we’ve pondered the question “What do I want to do when I grow up?” At that time we might have said a fireman, teacher, or ice skater. Over time our career plans evolved, and suddenly it seems we’re “grown up”? We’re really not done asking the “What do I want to do” question, it’s just the timeframe that’s changed. Now we need to think about what we want to be doing 2 years from now, 5 years from now, 10 years from now, etc.

There is a whole world of possibilities out there to choose from. For some it’s to become a manager and later a director. For others it’s a more technical route. We might want to remain in our current industry (e.g., financial, biotech) or we might want to give another industry a try. We need to give some thought about these options and decide where to focus our energy.

If we’re interested in another position within our current company, we have many resources available to us. Often there are job descriptions available via a company intranet, but if not our manager and HR personnel should be able to get these for us. We can consider positions within and outside our own department, and should think about not just the next job, but the entire direction of our career and the various jobs that could help get us there: in other words, our career path.

Once we find positions of interest, we should then try to learn more about them. A job description doesn’t usually tell the whole story. Find some people currently in those position, talk to them about what they do, and see out what they like/don’t like about the job. Meeting with people in these positions might even help us find a good mentor!

It might be that our career objectives aren’t a good match for our current company. Some example include when 1) we’ve been working with clinical trials data but have a burning desire to work in the financial industry, 2) they expect no openings in the area we want to move into, or 3) we want to do contracting or consulting. People change companies all the time for career growth. In that case it will be harder to find a good job description, and even more important to find someone with that experience to give us some information. Possibilities include contractors currently working at our company, and people we know through our network of career contacts. Again, ask them what the job really entails and what they like/don’t like about it.
The most difficult, though not impossible, situation is where we’re trying to create our own position. For example, a senior programmer that’s not interested in management wants to create a technical path when company currently doesn’t have such a thing. Depending on the size of the company this could prove to be a long process, and it will certainly require many skills, including determination, persistence, influence, and creativity. But consider the satisfaction when such a position is finally created!

**Talk to Our Manager(s)**

Sometimes we think that we must keep our goals and aspirations a secret from or manager, but as long these don’t include leaving the company, managers can be a good resource for us. In fact, management is usually quite open to discussions about career growth. The bottom line is that they want to retain their good employees, and to do that they must keep them happy and fulfilled.

However, managers don’t usually plan the career growth of their employees, but would rather see us take the initiative there. We simply need to tell our manager we want to discuss our development plan at one of our regular meetings, or, if those meetings are already very busy with other topics, schedule a separate one just for this purpose. At that meeting we should:

- Describe what we like about our current job and what other things we’d like to do (keep it positive and refrain from complaining about our current job or coworkers)
- Describe the research we’ve done (searching job descriptions, talking with HR, etc.)
- Reveal the position we’d like to be promoted into
- Justify why this is a good fit, and be sure to include how it will benefit our company, plus our manager (if applicable)
- Ask for their help, including opportunities to prove that we are capable for this position

Also, we might consider talking with our manager’s boss. At this level, they possibly know of opportunities outside of our manager’s realm. Be very tactful here. We don’t want our manager (or their manager) thinking we’re going above them because we don’t value them. If we decide to go this route, first talk with our manager about why we think it would be helpful to meet with their manager, and get their OK.

**Get Training**

It’s likely we’re going to need more than just on-the-job training for some of those higher positions. As SAS programmers we’ve likely taken training courses in different areas of SAS, so it shouldn’t be surprising that other types of training might be helpful for a promotion.

To become a leader, supervisor, manager, etc., we might benefit from courses in project management, communication, delegation, and coaching. If we’re lacking in an area that would be useful for our dream job, look for ways to get some training. Many companies offer these types of training courses either onsite though their HR department or with a local affiliate training vendor. We can instead take them on our own through many different vendor training companies. Some companies will pay for this type of external job-related training, and there are tax incentives to offset these costs when they don’t.

As SAS programmers we might have had some training on how to use SAS, but are often not trained specifically about the industry where we work. Taking these types of courses might help us understand our coworkers in other functional areas. For example, if we work in biotech, we might consider a course in microbiology, pharmaceuticals, or clinical trials. Often a couple of courses in statistics or business would be useful. We should ask ourselves whether knowing more about any of these areas would help us advance. We might even consider a formal degree or certificate, especially if we’re working in a company that is very particular about needing at least a certain level of schooling or piece of paper to be considered for a position. Because schooling can be so important, there are MBA programs now that are geared specifically to moving technical people into management roles.
The nice thing is that these days there are many part-time evening, weekend, or even on-line classes and degree programs designed for working adults; some even require that their students be working in a position that will allow them to use what they’re learning on the job. A word of warning: many of these schools are private and can be very expensive, so look into employer reimbursement and tax incentives here as well. There are many ways to search for these types of degrees, but one of my favorites is through Thompson Peterson’s. They have a specific search tool for online programs, which allows searching for many different courses of study and level of degree, plus they include information on programs throughout the world.

SOME WARNINGS

Less Time Spent Programming

Higher positions usually mean we’ll spend more time in meetings. A typical programmer might have 2 meetings a week, while a manager regularly juggles 5, 6, or more meetings a day! Even on the technical track we’re likely to have many more meetings as we move up, because the number of projects we work on increases and/or we’re involved on a more strategic rather than detail level.

When not in meetings, managers spend more time with people and people issues, such as employee reviews and resolving conflicts within the group, than with technical issues. Often the only time a programming manager gets to write code is when the whole group is working overtime to get a project completed on time. It’s easy to lose programming skills when they aren’t used regularly, so managers can quickly become less skilled than their reports.

Before moving into a management or even a higher technical role, we should consider whether we really want our daily workload to change in this way.

Work/Life Balance

Work demands will likely increase with a promotion. I attended a “meet the vice president” lunch with one of the VPs at my company, and I specifically asked her about work/life balance. She replied that she has been able to maintain a life outside of work, but that her job really defines when she’s available to do that. It seems that we are often put into a position where we must sacrifice our personal life for work, and it’s up to each of us to decide how far we’ll let that go.

I also read an interesting article that speaks to this issue by Rick Gilbert of PowerSpeaking, Inc. One takeaway message he had in his executive summary on the WORLD BUSINESS FORUM: LEADERSHIP SPEAKS was that “we can’t expect to have it all”. At this forum, “Jim Collins noted that about half the executives he studied had personal lives that were a mess”, and suggested that “for them satisfaction and purpose came from work, not family”. Something to consider if we aspire to the executive ranks.

Before pushing for a promotion, talk to others currently in the position to get a feel for how much impact the job has had on their personal and home life.

The Blame Game

Having more responsibility means we’ll get more of the blame when things go wrong. We must be prepared to accept responsibility and deal with larger “failings” than with lower positions.

Love or Money?

Last but not least, consider why we want the promotion. It might be that we’re actually quite happy with our current job but what we’re looking for is more money or recognition. Perhaps it’s just a natural human desire to want to progress in all aspects of our lives, and a promotion is a way to accomplish this in business. If we’re considering a
promotion for reasons other than that we want to do what that job entails, we need to step back and think about it a bit. Will we really be happy with the title, money, etc. if we no longer enjoy what we’re doing?

While in the long term many people can make more money in management, there are always a number who choose to stay technical and can do quite well there. As mentioned earlier, the technical path is often a little more difficult to navigate, but most of the people I’ve talked with that have made the effort really seem to enjoy it. It’s also worth noting that in some companies it can be hard to “go back” to a technical role once we’ve made the leap to management.

Since money is often at the heart of our desire for a promotion, here are a couple ideas on how to get more, even without a promotion. Sometimes salary increases can be made for a “market adjustment”. Most companies keep track of salaries for all the positions within their industry, and if we’re not making as much as others with similar experience in the same industry, our manager might be able to negotiate for us a salary increase based on the current market rates. For those who really enjoy (or at least aren’t intimidated by) discussing salary changes, consider contracting or consulting independently, where we can re-negotiate our rates as often as we like.

For those of us happy with our job but looking for other rewards, it can be possible to get these from our manager. These could include awards, additional time off, unofficial titles (project lead, standards programmer, ODS expert, etc.), and opportunities to represent the department on special projects or at offsite meetings and conferences. We should think of what might motivate us or give us that feeling of accomplishment, and suggest these to our manager. Since these types of rewards don’t need to go through the HR department, cost little or no money, and can help with employee retention, management is likely to be quite accommodating here!

Finally, there should be no shame in wanting to stay in a comfortable job so that we can maintain a full personal or family life. There is a whole spectrum out there, from the workaholic who spends no time with friends and family, to the stay-at-home parent. We must choose where we want to be on this spectrum. If we’re happy where we are, be sure to let management know so they don’t overburden us trying to push us up the corporate ladder against our will!

We must be sure the promotion we’re seeking is really what we want, and we’re not doing it just for the money, prestige, or power.

**CONCLUSION**

There are many things we can do right now in our current role to help us win a future promotion. Not only do we need to perform well in our technical role, but we must also embrace some of the more “soft” skills. Communication is the key to the soft skills: we need to do it well and do it often. Good communication skills will be demonstrated in our manners and how we handle bad news, plus will help make us visible and allow us to network. Organization is also important, in that it allows us to keep track of deadlines (and know early on of any potential delays) and accomplishments (for that annual review).

We also need to give some thought about what it is we want to do next. Before moving into a new position, we should find out as much as we can about it so we’re not disappointed later. I described a few general types of positions to consider, including management, a technical track, and consulting/contracting, plus different industries. Each of these types of jobs has different benefits and challenges. The adventurous might want to consider dabbling in most or all of them. In fact, a broad range of experiences in different areas can often be a bonus for career advancement.

There is no specific “right” career path for a SAS programmer. We must each decide what works for us and figure out how we can get to wherever it is we want to go. I’ve outlined some general techniques that have helped me in my career, and I hope you will find them useful for you in yours.
REFERENCES


2 Thompson Peterson’s website is www.petersons.com. The direct link to Thompson Peterson’s search page for online programs is http://iiswinprdl03.petersons.com/distancelearning/code/search.asp.


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