Paper 217-2008

# How to Get Promoted: Planning for Career Growth

Sandra Minjoe, Genentech Inc, South San Francisco, CA

## 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.

## DISCLAIMER

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[1] 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.

Keep in mind that we can't break 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**

As we learned back when we were children, 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 specific. 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, in private

> "Based on some 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. Sue will hopefully use this advice to grow as a programmer, and this type of approach might even 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, if at all possible. Sometimes we must offer criticisms of another employee to management, and in this event, again, 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 end up using one of our solutions, but is often able to build off of them.

We also need to deal with bad news of delays to a 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, authorize overtime pay, or even extend the deadline. 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 usually 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 forgotten for cross-functional team discussions and 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 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 a section for a user manual.  We can give presentations at in-house or user group meetings.  Industry groups like SAS Global Forum 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 when in groups, prepare to speak up in meetings by reading through the agenda ahead of time and noting a few contributions to make.  It's not as hard to speak up in a crowd when you're comfortable with the topic and well-prepared.

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 industry meetings and conferences.

We commonly 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. 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 an official 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.  For example, I once helped a former manager get a short-term contracting position where I was working; not only did he end up working there, but we now each use the other as a reference!

**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 do we really want to count on that?

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 every two years, so my manager always has access to a relatively current version.  We should consider passing our resume 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 with our resume/CV?

## OUR NEXT ROLE

### Personal 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 fire fighter, teacher, or ice skater.  Over time our career plans evolved, and suddenly it seems we're "grown up"!  We're still 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., biotech) or we might want to give another industry a try.  We need to give some thought to these options and decide where to focus our energy.

For some of us, we're not at all sure what we want to do.  There are so many options to choose from!  Even if we do nothing else, we should make a list of:

- What it is we like about our current job

- What we don't like or wish we could do less of

- What types of activities we're not doing now that we'd like to do

 This way, when a new position comes up we can quickly evaluate it against our likes/dislikes/desires to determine if it's something worth pursuing.  A wealth of other ideas can be found in a book called "Finding Your True Calling" [2].

When we don't have much experience in a specific area, it can be hard to decide whether it's something we'd like to do.  There are many ways we can "try on" roles before formally moving into them.  Thinking about writing a book?  Look for ways to help write department documents.   Want to move into applications development?  Volunteer to write a small application to be used within your immediate group.  Considering a move into management?  Act as a team lead or get involved in volunteer activities where you can lead a project.

Finally, we should keep in mind that we don't necessarily have to get all of our fulfillment from our "day" job.  For example, people who love helping others learn new things could teach at night class at a local community college, volunteer at their child's school, or present papers at industry meetings and conferences.  For many people, juggling multiple interests is fun.  For others, moving around from one industry or career to another keeps them from getting bored.  Margaret Lobenstine has a booked called "The Renaissance Soul" [3] that can help those of us with multiple passions figure out how to do all the things we love.

### Job Research

After completing the personal research to figure out what we want to do, we can then tackle finding a job that has these traits.  If we're interested in finding 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/or the HR department 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, a 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 positions, talk to them about what they really do, and see out what they like/don't like about the job.

It might be that our career objectives aren't a good match for our current company.  Some examples include when:

- We've been working with clinical trials data but have a burning desire to work in the financial industry
- They expect no openings in the area we want to move into
- We want to move into or out of contracting/consulting

People change companies all the time for career growth.  In fact, a broad range of experiences in different areas can often be a bonus for career advancement.

Changing companies will make it 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.

**Talk to Our Manager(s)**

Sometimes we think that we must keep our goals and aspirations a secret from our manager, but as long these can be met by staying with the company, managers can be a great 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.

Managers don't generally plan the career growth of their employees, but would rather see us take the initiative for our own careers.  I recommend that a separate meeting be scheduled specifically to discuss our own professional development plan.  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 the 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 we think 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 and ready for this position

Also, consider talking with our manager's boss or to other managers in the company.  They possibly know of opportunities outside of our own manager's realm.  But be very tactful here.  We don't want our manager thinking we're going above or around them because we don't value them.  If we decide to go this route, we should first let our manager know we're also talking to others at the company about career growth opportunities.

**Find a Mentor**

Mentoring can be a great way to learn.  Many companies encourage mentoring because it can help circulate skills and ideas between the person being mentored and the one doing the mentoring.  Mentors themselves often find the relationship rewarding, because they get practice on helping others develop skills and often learn more about what's going on at a grass-roots level.

Most companies, however, don't provide official mentoring programs, and we'll need to tackle this on our own. When we find someone who provides us with good insights or has a specific skill we'd like to learn, we should think about whether this person would make a good mentor.  Potential mentors could be someone doing the job we'd like to do, or someone who has a specific skill we'd like to improve in ourselves.

Our potential mentor is likely higher up within the organization and very busy.  We need to approach this person with specifics of what we'd like to learn.  Volunteer to plan the mentoring meetings, working with their schedule and providing agendas.  The easier we make it for our potential mentor, the more likely this person will be able to carve out time to spend with us.

### 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 probably 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.  If not, we can always 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.

One area of training worth considering is in the industry where we work, as a way to 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 (and others) whether knowing more about any other 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 now MBA programs 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 <u>require</u> that their students be working in a position that will allow them to use on the job what they're learning in the classroom.  A word of warning: many of these schools are private and can be very expensive, so look into employer reimbursement, other means of financial aid, and tax incentives. There are many ways to search for these types of degrees, but one of my favorites is through Thompson Peterson's[4] website. They have a specific search tool for "distance learning" 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 could 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 dealing 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 writes 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

In this busy world, it seems that we are often put into a position where we consider sacrificing our personal life for work.  It's up to each of us to decide how far we'll let that go.

Work demands will likely increase with a promotion.  If we're currently not good at saying "no" and allow ourselves to get pulled into 50-, 60-, 70- or more hour work-weeks, don't imagine it will get any easier as we move up.

I attended a "meet the vice president" lunch with one of the VPs at my company and specifically asked her about her 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.  She gave an example of taking time off in the middle of the day to see a baseball game when a friend from out of town was visiting, but noted that things were pretty quiet that day and she'd put in some long hours in the days before in order to clear her calendar.

I also read an interesting article by Rick Gilbert of PowerSpeaking, Inc.[5] that speaks to this issue.  A major takeaway message for me from his executive summary on the World Business Forum: Leadership Speaks was that "we can't expect to have it all".  He gives as an example a study on executives that showed about half them had personal lives that were "a mess", where the presenter suggested that for these executives "satisfaction and purpose came from work, not family".

Where do we get our own personal satisfaction and purpose?  Is it from work, family, or a combination – and are we happy with this?

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 when things go well we'll probably get more of the glory.  And it also means we'll get more of the blame when things go wrong!  If we're in charge of a project and one of the people on the team doesn't fulfill their part, we must shoulder some of that accountability.  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 the 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 and/or aren't very good at it?

While it might seem that managers make the most money, there are many programmers 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 who 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.  In addition to cost of living or annual raises, 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 independent contracting or consulting, where we can re-negotiate our rates

as often as we like.  But remember that contractors don't get those additional monetary rewards (such as stock options and bonuses) or many of the other benefits (such as health care) that more traditional positions offer.

For those of us happy with our job but looking for other rewards, it might 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 many of 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 each choose where we want to be on this spectrum.  If we're happy where we are be sure to let management know, otherwise they may 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.  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 like to do, don't like to do, and wish we could do.  Before moving into a new position, we should find out as much as we can about it so we're not disappointed later.  Each position will have different benefits and challenges.  The adventurous might want to consider dabbling in many of them.

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.

## TRADEMARK CITATION

SAS and all other SAS Institute Inc. product or service names are registered trademarks or trademarks of SAS Institute Inc. in the USA and other countries. ® indicates USA registration.

Other brand and product names are registered trademarks or  trademarks of their respective companies.

## REFERENCES

[1] Minjoe, S., 2004. "Writing Code That Lasts" *Proceedings of the Twenty-Ninth Annual SAS User Group International Conference*.  The direct link to this paper is http://www2.sas.com/proceedings/sugi29/134-29.pdf.

[2] Young, V. (Ed.).  (2007).  *Finding Your True Calling: The Handbook for People Who Still Don't Know What They Want to Be When They Grow Up But Can't Wait to Find Out.*  Massachusetts: ChangingCourse.com.

[3] Lobenstine, M.  (2006).  *The Renaissance Soul: Life Design for People with Too Many Passions to Pick Just One.* New York: Broadway Books.

[4] Thompson Peterson's website is www.petersons.com.  The direct link to Thompson Peterson's search page for online programs is http://www.petersons.com/distancelearning/code/search.asp.

[5] Gilbert, R., 2005.  PowerSpeaking, Inc.'s website is http://www.powerspeaking.com.  The direct link to the executive summary mentioned in the text is http://209.51.156.182/resources-hot-tip.html.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my "network" in proofreading this paper and offering up some wonderful suggestions.  Sarbjit, Susan, Yongcun, Patty, Phuong, and Lynn, I appreciate your time and effort.

Thanks also go out to the many people who helped me hone these concepts over the years: my family, teachers, classmates, managers, coworkers, and friends.  I couldn't have done it without you!

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Sandra Minjoe
Principal Statistical Programmer Analyst
Genentech, Inc
1 DNA Way
South San Francisco, CA  94080
Phone: (650) 225-4733
Email: sminjoe@gene.com