

PERCEPTIONS OF WHICH FACTORS ARE CRITICAL FOR CAREER SUCCESS ONCE YOU ARE ON THE JOB

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the statistical responses by various age groups of the perceived importance of the various career success factors. By using a simple survey instrument the authors have been able to differentiate the importance of the various factors by various age groups; teens, twenty, thirty, and forty-fifty year olds. The survey included these eleven choices: WORKING ON SPECIAL PROJECTS, KNOWING WHEN TO GET ON AND GET OFF PROJECTS, KNOWING HOW YOU AND YOUR WORK ARE MEASURED, A MENTOR, GETTING INVOLVED IN WHAT YOUR COMPANY DOES, EDUCATION AND TRAINING, EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OR WITH THE COMPANY, PERSONAL APPEARANCE AND DEMEANOR, COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS, BEING LUCKY, and BEING A LEADER.

When comparing the order of importance between the groups and investigating the top three choices in each group the data show: Not one factor was a top selection of all four groups; special projects and communication skills were in the top three of the 10, 20, and 30 year groups. The bottom three choices show that all groups believe luck has little effect on career success and the 20 and 30 year groups scored appearance low also. The teenagers believe that a mentor has little to no impact on careers whereas the seniors believe that mentors are critical.

INTRODUCTION

Most professionals are hoping to have satisfying careers and this usually means that career advances and promotions will happen often so that they can climb the ladder at a faster pace than their peers. These people have been advised by parents, teachers, and friends concerning what is necessary to move to the top. It appears that these advisors often fail to include some of the more critical activities that must be mastered should one wish to advance rapidly.

Most likely the initial inputs received by the young included such ideas as work hard, be on time, don't get into trouble, have impeccable integrity, be absolutely loyal, use good judgment, and exude confidence. Added to these ideas would have been show intelligence, be creative, be honest, demonstrate initiative, and on and on. The literature is replete with "How to advance your career" articles and books.

This paper addresses the differences in the perceptions of differing age groups when it comes to career advancement. The authors divided the data into four ten year age groups of teens, 20s, 30s, and 40-50s and compared the various group perceptions of the importance of a selected listing of factors that can effect a person's career advancement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Typical information associated with career advancement is generally a listing of what the individual authors believe will work. This information is based upon experience, education, or whatever. Listed below is a small sample of these typical lists.

The Career Playbook includes the following list of "secrets" to career success: Identify your career goals. Create an action plan. Be results-driven. Update your skills. Keep on learning. Network. Find a mentor. Be positive. Be persistent. Be enthusiastic.

- 1. Identify your career goals.**
- 2. Create an action plan.**
- 3. Be results-driven.**
- 4. Update your skills.**
- 5. Keep on learning.**
- 6. Network.**
- 7. Find a mentor.**
- 8. Be positive.**
- 9. Be persistent.**
- 10. Be enthusiastic.**

Jean Gatz, in her article "What You Need to Succeed in the Workplace," states that most senior leaders look for qualities such as initiative and efficiency when selecting new employees or identifying those for promotions. She considers the following ideas key strategies.

1. Keep your personal life in order
2. Work smarter, harder, faster.
3. Demonstrate and document value-added
4. Welcome change.
5. Commit t lifelong learning
6. Look for leadership opportunities.
7. Communicate openly and directly

As one might expect, even the international literature provides multiple articles and again with multiple listings of good ideas for promotion. Mark Hall of Argentina's OM Personal provided the following list titled the "Top 12 Secrets of Career Success."

1. Prioritize and use your mornings.

2. Think health first.
3. Work smarter, not harder.
4. Use your initiative and work to the point.
5. Keep meetings short.
6. Learn to listen.
7. Be ready to give your opinion.
8. Believe in yourself and have a good self-image.
9. Set time aside for thinking.
10. Show good humor.
11. Delegate.
12. Be prepared to make mistakes

Probably the best advice concerning success in anything is all about love. Most of us have often heard the cliché, “Choose a career that you love and you’ll never work a day in your life.” (Anonymous) Even Albert Schweitzer said, “Love what you are doing, you will be successful.” (10a) Laurel R. Simmons in her article “Are you Careering in Control?” states, “To be in a position to create opportunities and implement solid career advancement strategies . . . Do what you love to do.”

It is important to have a job you love. In fact research has often shown that having a job you despise causes high levels of stress, is emotionally draining and can ultimately cause health problems. You can’t get ahead if you are ill.

However, mentoring seems to be the most often cited topic when it comes to career advancement literature. According to Armando Gomez, in his Career Advisor column, “By definition, a mentor is a professional that has knowledge and experience in the workplace and is willing to share his acquired “wisdom” with others.” The following is a very short synopsis of what is out there.

In Pat Boer’s article “Advancing Your Career” she states, “Experts say the best way to advance is by having a trusted and powerful mentor.” And “Most stumble along or believe success depends upon qualifications and credentials.”

According to Kristy Lee, your best mentor is most likely your immediate supervisor. You will need to “Join committee meetings, get involved, go out with people from work, volunteer, and go to conferences” to optimize your chances of soliciting a mentor.

In Ernie O. Cedilla’s article “Ten Introspective Ways to Start the Year Right” he states, “Successful persons attribute most successes to a good mentor or coach who can be dispassionate in showing them their strengths and weaknesses.”

M. Heffernan and S-N Joni report in “Fast Company: How Smart People Work” that, “Even with research that demonstrates that mentoring is ‘the single most valuable ingredient in a successful career for both men and women’ pitfalls can still occur.”

An interesting case is identified by W. Stueck in Canada where the winner of a \$60,000 entrepreneurial competition sponsored by venture capitalists noted that, “the most valuable thing he gained from the contest was the advice of his mentor.”

Some of the top leaders mentioned in F. Haley and C. Canabou’s, “Fast Talk: The mentors’ mentors” had the following to say:

Warren Bennis tells how his mentor helped him learn how to identify “the handful of people who make all the difference in your life.”

Tim Murphy (Harvard coach) believes his mentors taught him to be a mentor “in terms of how you live your life.”

Betsy Bernard, president of AT&T, learned much from her mentors and states that, “a great leader truly believes that personal development is a never-ending journey. If you can help people embrace and love continuous development, then you are really making a difference in their lives and careers.”

C. Johnson of the Washington Post states that, “having mentor circles, where you surround yourself with mentors can propel your career.”

T. Galvin in an article in *Training* titled “The 2002 Top 100” noted that, “. . . mentoring significantly contributes to career development, retention, and leadership succession.”

Kathy Simmons of IMDiversity.com writes of “Six Powerful Secrets of Career Success.” One of the Secrets is “Learn to Play Politics” and Simmons uses the advice of Bay area therapist and career consultant Julie Anderson, MFT, Ph.D., who advises employees to beware of this myth, “Hard work will be positively rewarded by your manager and will eventually result in a promotion.” Anderson advises clients to work hard and pay attention to the political landscape at work. “Every organization, large or small, public or private, has an inherent hierarchy that is made up of people at the high end who have the ‘power’ to make things happen to people on the ‘low’ end with no power to influence the course of events,” explains Anderson. She also states that, “Interestingly, people with ‘power’ are not necessarily the people with the ‘titles.’ Within a department there is always someone who has the boss’s ear. If you are not this person, you had better be on the ‘good’ side of this person, if you hope to be recognized and promoted.” In reality, many people do excellent work, only to be “rewarded” with increased expectations for future productivity!

Catherine Trebble in her 2010 article, “Career Planning-factors You Must Consider” stated “When it comes to planning for a new career, it's important to not only look at the present, but also the past.”

The All-Business web-site in August 2010 leads with:

1. Talk to your boss.
2. Ask for more.

3. Volunteer for boards.
4. Sharpen your people skills.
5. Be innovative.
6. Find a mentor.
7. Sell yourself.
8. Keep learning.
9. Network.
10. Build your reputation.

[Dawn Rosenberg McKay](#) writes about the mentor-protégé relationship. “It's a concept that originated in Homer's *Odyssey*. It was even discussed in an episode of *Seinfeld*. According to many experts, everyone should partake in it. That is anyone who hopes to have a successful career. “

Pam Baker states that “It is a mistake, however, to only consider mentors who can help keep your skills and ideas up-to-date. Consider the political value of mentors. While it certainly helps to have a mentor inside the same company, to achieve the best competitive edge you may need to seek mentors outside of the company as well.” she concluded.

Jane M. Lommel, PhD, in her article “The Mentoring Message: How it Can Enhance Your Career Development” presented some ideas on mentoring that are noted below:

Mentoring is the process in which successful individuals go out of their way to help others establish goals and develop the skills to reach them.

Mentoring can help you acquire skills, open new doors, increase your confidence, widen your perspective, avoid many errors, otherwise enhance your career and life.

Mentor relationship should be beneficial to both the mentor and the protégé. Here is a list of qualities for successful.

Generally, a mentor has at least 5-10 or more years of experience in his/her career than the protégé. It is important to set goals and expectations at the beginning. The mentor drives vision and mission down to the protégé. The protégé drives reality up. There should be a system for reporting results and planning future activities.

Adam Tinworth provides excellent guidance in selecting a mentor when he suggests the mentor selection process shown below:

“Reflect on why the mentor is important

- Create a list of attributes that are most important for the mentor to possess
- Make a list of all peers, bosses, or other staff that have the potential to influence others
- Take the list and reduce the names to the two or three individuals that make the best possible match
- A potential mentor does not have to work in the same organization

- A potential mentor does not have to be in a formal leadership position”

He continued with an outline as to approaching potential mentors and this is shown below:

- Ask for time in their schedule, and let them know the purpose of the request
- Have an organized plan on the approach
- Do not force an immediate response from the potential mentor
- Be prepared to answer questions a potential mentor will have
- Be gracious regardless of the answer
- Have a plan for the next meeting should the parties agree to the relationship”

Tamara Dowling, CPRW, in her article “The Power of a Career mentor” included individual meetings (one on one), Team Meetings, Goal Setting, and Guidance as the keys to successful mentoring. She provided the following tips for finding a career mentor, soliciting their support and making the relationship meaningful.

Finding a Career Mentor

1. Don't expect your manager to be your mentor
2. Look for senior people within your company who have been along a career path similar to yours
3. Find an individual who shares your values, work style, and sense of humor
4. Choose someone you admire, and who is uplifting

Asking for Their Support

1. Before you ask for support, prepare a plan
2. Invite the potential mentor to meet to discuss your career
3. At the meeting, define the relationship and your vision

When you study with a career mentor, you benefit from their experiences. That experience can give you the advantage that moves you ahead. As you reach your career goals, don't forget to repay the favor by helping others achieve their goals.

All of this information is good and should be very useful for that pursuing career success, but again not sufficient. The authors of this paper's approach are to be much more specific. If the above lists are strategic in nature, then this paper is tactical.

THE AUTHORS' IDEAS

The authors have been studying promotions in government, industry, and academe for over 35 years. The observations, research, and anecdotal information have molded their opinions as to what is important in career advancement. A review of multitudes of biographies and autobiographies continues to demonstrate that those who have achieved senior levels of responsibility all love their work and nearly all had mentors. For the survey instrument the authors selected the following eleven rules that contribute to early promotions and successful careers.

Rule #1. Love what you do or do something else: It is extremely important that you love what it is that you do. As humans we only excel in those endeavors that we thoroughly enjoy doing. The Michael Jordans, Troy Aikmans, Jack Welshes, and Bill Gates all love what they do. It is impossible to name someone who is the best in what they do who doesn't love what they do. Can you think of one thing that you did extremely well while disliking the task? How well do you do things that you dislike? If you don't love what you are doing, those who do will be passing you soon and not looking back. If you wish to be successful and you are not in love with what you do but can't change what you do, then plan to be unsuccessful and miserable. It will do you little good to read on.

Rule #2. Pick your boss or you will be passed over: The quickest way up the corporate ladder is on the coattails of your boss. After all, it is your immediate supervisor who assigns your work, evaluates your performance, and recommends raises and promotions. Ideally you need to select a boss that is on the fast track and moving up. These fast trackers make excellent mentors. These people are typically younger than contemporaries in similarly positioned jobs. They are easy to identify and everyone will know who is "on the way up." Your number one job is to get on the fast burner's team and you do this by demonstrating that you have all the characteristics listed above. Some creativity will work here. Be original and get on the team.

A few notes about the fast burners are in order. As their careers blossom, one thing is common to all of them – high performance reports. Studies indicate that on a one to ten scale with ten being the best, the fast burners have consistently been rated as tens. Similarly the non-promoted or slow burners are rated at say five. Now if you work for a slow burner, what do you think your evaluation will be? What changes when you work for a fast burner? Seriously a ten for you is not out of the question. The fast burner justifies the high ratings because of the importance of the job, how well you perform, and the fact that as such a great leader he/she expects the best and gets the best.

There are nine more concepts associated with getting promoted. However, love and selecting your boss are the most important and often much more so than the other nine combined. You are on your way to the top with the advice of Momma, love of what you do, and a boss that you selected. Now you need to know the fine points. The following nine additional strategies, in no particular order of importance, are the additional keys to career success.

Rule #3. Get on the special projects or you will never be special: They must be special to someone who is in a position to label them as such. Once identified as special, these projects receive the resources and corporate attention that in most cases nearly always guarantees success. There is nothing better on the resume than a list of important projects that were all successful. In fact often when success is not possible management will terminate the project by declaring it a success, but slightly differently defined. For the young up-and-comer these special projects provide access to top leadership people, including the previously mentioned fast burners, who almost always lead these special projects.

Rule #4 . Get on and off on time or you may be dumped: All efforts begin with small budgets and small staffs and grow through the early part of the production phase. During this

growth phase objectives can be grossly overstated (200 miles per gallon, nine times the speed of sound, needed by 97% of mankind, etc.), publicity and interest are keen (articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, network TV coverage, etc.), leadership by a fast burner, and promotions within the project team well in excess of the corporate averages. During these early phases of a project everything seems wonderful and there exists no physical method of bursting the balloon. However, when the product is available this is no longer true and so may be many of the early overstated objectives. Stay on the project long enough to have your pictures taken during the initial “roll out” ceremony, but from this ceremony go directly to human resources and get onto another project that is in its early beginning stages. During the later stages of projects slow burners lead and demotions rather than promotions flourish as resources decline, seemingly in inverse proportions to the growth of problems created during the early project stages. During latter stages these efforts are often lead by slow burners and/or those approaching retirement.

Rule #5. Figure out how to keep score so you will know how to win: Can you think of playing any game intelligently while not knowing how the score was determined? Figure out what really counts on your performance reports and what is a good evaluation. On a one to ten scale do you need an 8, or 9, or 10 to be competitive for promotion? What must you do to get a 10? If you picked your boss intelligently, he/she will know the answer to these and many more questions. Don't waste your time trying to get this information from your HR department. Most companies consider this proprietary and held it very close to the vest. Remember, if you don't know how to keep score how will you really know how to play the game nor will you know if you are going to win or lose.

Rule #6 . Get involved or get out: This is a go with the flow and enjoy, while accomplishing the relevant, non-ordinary, and visible suggestion. Getting involved is easy when you love what you do, but this strategy speaks to special single actions that you can take. If you work in the swamp, bring in a larger snake and show the office staff. Don't frighten them, just show them the snake. The snake is relevant to what you in the swamp have to face each day. Bringing it to the office is surely non-ordinary and clearly visible. This actually happened and the snake carrier was the next person promoted in the unit even though the boss did not know his name.

Rule #7. Communicate or clam up and whither: We talk, listen, write, and read. It isn't much, but it's all we have. If you can't speak the King's English, listen intently, write understandable reports, and read with comprehension, you are in a lot of trouble when it comes to promotion. You must understand what management is saying by observing what they do. That is “listening” that counts. Your executive summaries and short presentations may be your only access to top management and theirs to you so it better be good. Make those executive summaries so exciting that no one can stop reading until they get to the end. Create enthusiasm with those presentations.

Rule #8. Look the part or part with the dream: Your appearance, demeanor, and clothing all make a statement as to who you are and where you are headed. Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Blink*, clearly shows that many decisions are made in the blink of an eye. You'd better look good the first time they see you. Dress and carry yourself as if you already have your boss' job.

Clothes may not make the man/woman, but dress clearly states who you are and where you want to go.

Rule #9. Fill the squares or be circled out: The squares are those experiences, education, and assignments that are required to progress in a career. Ask your mentor. Find out what your company's leaders have accomplished, what kind of training and education they have completed, and what jobs they have held on their roads to success. Since these leaders know that what they have done is the best approach to a successful career, they are very supportive of those who are on the same road.

Rule #10. Be a leader now or a follower forever: Promotion and success usually mean being up front – the leader. We now know that leaders are built rather than born and the building program is based on leadership experience. When the group needs a leader, take charge. Volunteer to lead the division's United Campaign. Coach a Peewee football team. Run the next office party. Get out in front and practice leading. You can't become a senior leader without solid experience in leading. This is clearly a case of "practice makes perfect," well maybe not perfect.

Rule #11. Be lucky or "Good Luck!" If you are just unlucky nothing will help. However, "The harder I work the luckier I am" should be your mantra, if you hope to be promoted. Most of us believe that we can improve our "luck" and we do this by doing what has to be done as we climb the ladder of success.

METHODOLOGY

Over the past few years the authors surveyed nearly 300 professionals and "budding professionals" by using the simple survey questions explained above. This survey was used as an exercise conducted as part of the leadership portion of a graduate course in organizational behavior, a lecture to potential engineering undergraduates, and to entering freshmen engineering students. The older respondents were generally part-time students, generally in their late 20s to early 30s, working full-time in government, industry, or academe, and enrolled in this course because it was a required course in the University of Dayton's Master of Science program in Engineering Management.

The groups surveyed were divided both by age and also by gender. There were 42 seventeen to nineteen year olds, 45 twenty some things, 37 thirty some things, and 38 forty and fifty year groups. The survey was accurately completed by 102 males and 33 females. Not all of the surveys included gender or age as inputs as these items were added only recently to the survey instrument. The average values for each of the 11 rules were computer for each of the groups defined above. These data were then graphed to show the changes in values with age group or gender.

RESULTS

The respondents included 94 males, 26 females, 43 did not indicate age or sex, 22 teens, 45 twenties, 37 thirties, 38 forty-fifties. The results show that the respondents ranked demonstrating

leadership skills, knowing how you and your work are measured, and speaking and writing skills as the top three ideas necessary for promotion. Having a mentor was ranked fourth. Explanations for the tables below follows:

10 = TEENS, 20 = TWENTIES, 30 = THIRTIES, 40 = FORTIES, 50 = FIFTIES

EX = EXPERIENCE, ET = EDUCATION AND TRAINING, CS = COMMUNICATION SKILLS, LD = LEADERSHIP SKILLS, IV = INVOLVEMENT, AP = APPEARANCE, ME = MEASURES OF EFFECTIVENESS, SP = SPECIAL PROJECTS, MT = MENTOR, OO = GET ON AND OFF ON TIME, LK = LUCK.

M = MEN, W = WOMEN

10		20		30		40-50	
8.7	EX	5.7	EX	6.5	EX	5.8	EX
8.7	ET	6.4	ET	6	ET	5.4	ET
8.3	CS	6.6	CS	7.1	CS	6.7	CS
7.9	LD	7.2	LD	6.9	LD	6.1	LD
6.3	IV	7.2	IV	5.4	IV	4	IV
5.9	AP	4.1	AP	4.6	AP	5.6	AP
5.3	ME	6.4	ME	7.1	ME	6.5	ME
4.8	SP	6.6	SP	7.4	SP	7.2	SP
4.2	MT	7	MT	6.1	MT	8	MT
3.7	OO	5.8	OO	6	OO	5.9	OO
2.4	LK	3.3	LK	3.1	LK	4.7	LK

Table 1: Responses by age.

W		rank	M		rank
8.1	LD	1	7.5	SP	1
7.1	MT	2	7	CS	2
7.1	EX	3	6.9	ME	3
6.9	CS	4	6.7	EX	4
6.2	OO	5	6.7	LD	5
6.2	ME	6	6.6	MT	6
5.8	SP	7	6.3	ET	7
5.8	IV	8	5.4	OO	8
5.7	ET	9	5.1	IV	9
4	AP	10	4.6	AP	10
3.2	LK	11	3.2	LK	11

Table 2: Response by gender.

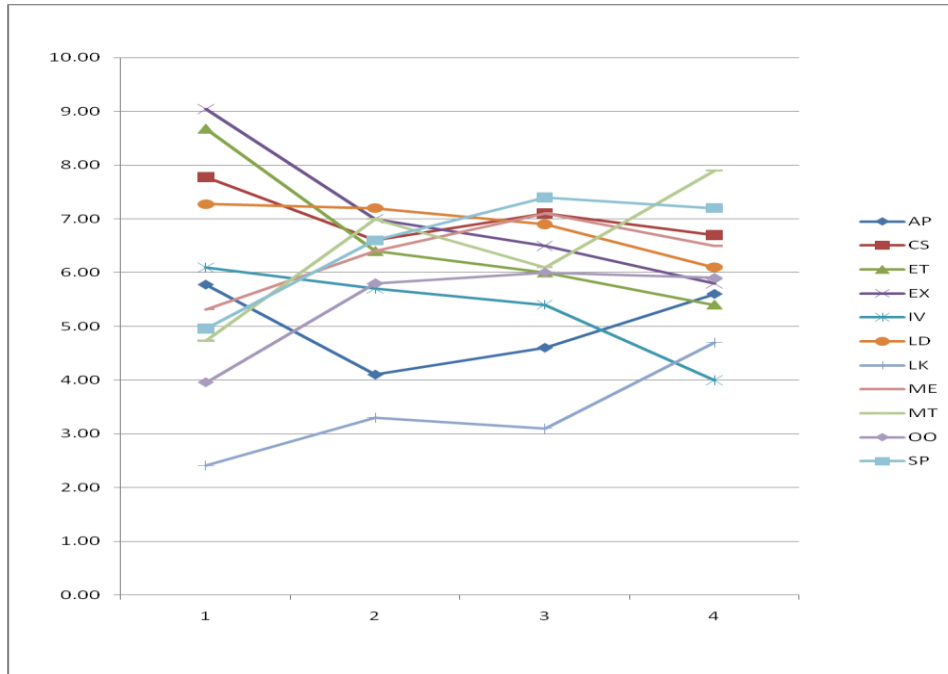


Figure 1: Success factors by age with the x-axis 1 = teen responses, 2 = 20s, 3 = 30s, etc.

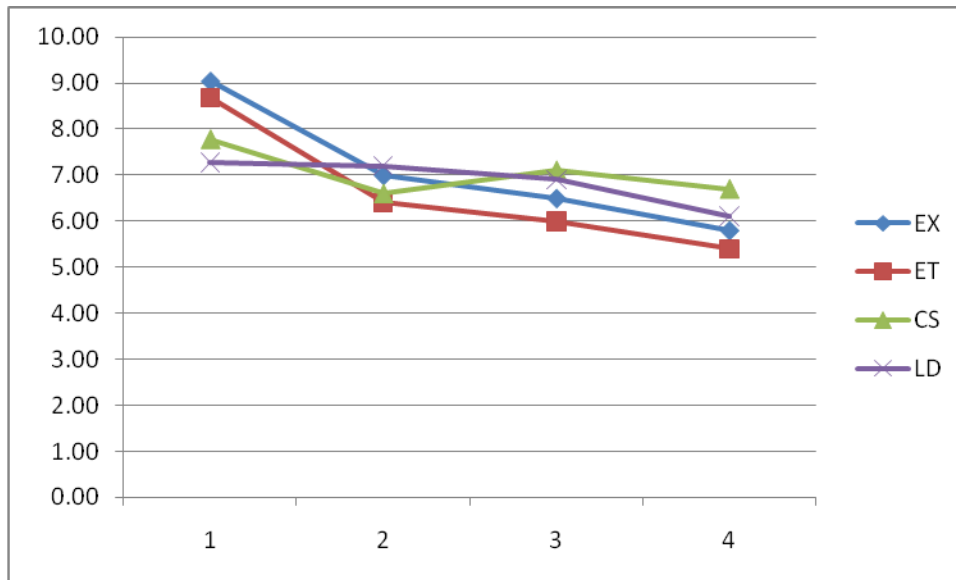


Figure 2: Experience, education and training, and demonstrating leadership decline in importance with age. Communication skills remain very important to all age groups.

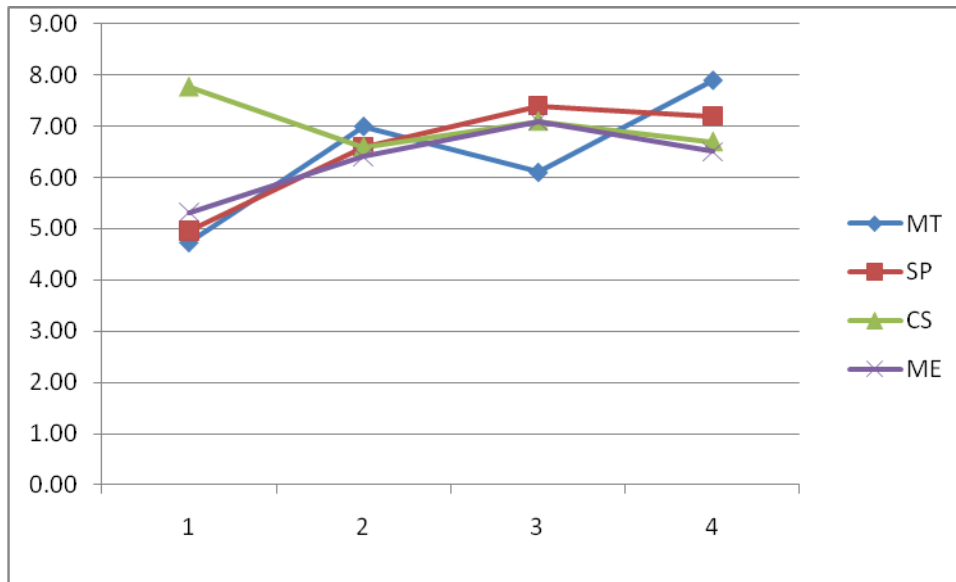


Figure 3: Mentors, special projects, and measures of effectiveness generally increase with age. Communication skills remain very important to all age groups.

Data Analysis: Since the data represent importance rankings of eleven factors, some simplification made sense. These ranks were recorded into a three level system representing low, medium, and high importance attached to the factor. The recode was 1 – 4 Low, 5 – 7 Medium, and 8 -11 High.

The objective was to see whether the respondent’s age or sex had any bearing on the ranking of a given factor. There were 46 respondents that did not disclose their sex, so the grand totals of observations are different for the sex and age tables. As an example of the count data here is the crosstab result for the importance attached to being selected for special projects.

Special Projects	Male	Female	Row Totals
Low	36	16	52
Medium	30	22	52
High	113	18	131
Column Totals	179	56	235

Table 3: An example of count data by gender.

Our test was for independence of the factor rating and the sex of the respondents. This can be formulated as a Chi-Square test with $(r-1) * (c-1)$ degrees of freedom based on the count data in the table. See, for instance, Dillon and Goldstein for details. In this particular case we get a p-value of about .0001 and a significant result.

Given that we are about to make eleven of these tests for the age and sex characteristics the experiment-wise error rate warrants a very conservative error rate for each individual test. In the

table below we report only tests which had an alpha $\leq .02$. Once new data become available we can make an independent test of the significant factors. Table one below show the p-values that are significant.

Factor	Sex	Age
Special Projects	< .0001	ns
On & Off	ns	ns
Experience	.005	ns
Luck	ns	ns
Mentor	ns	.015
MOEs	ns	.015
Appearance	ns	ns
Leadership	.0003	ns
Getting Involved	ns	ns
Educ. & Training	ns	ns
Comm. Skills	< .0001	ns

Table 4 – Significance of sex and age on factor rankings.

The count data is presented in Tables 2 and 3 for the factors that were judged significant.

Project	Special Projects		Experience		Leadership		Comm. Skills	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Low	36	16	57	8	50	14	74	22
Medium	30	22	42	24	63	6	77	10
High	113	18	80	24	66	36	28	24

Table 5 – Count data for factors judged dependent on sex of respondent.

Project	MOEs			Mentor		
	20 - 30	30 – 40	≥ 40	20 - 30	30 - 40	≥ 40
Low	61	11	6	61	14	7
Medium	46	8	17	63	16	5
High	97	23	12	80	12	23

Table 6 – Count data for factors judged dependent on age of respondent.

CONCLUSIONS

Young professionals consider luck to be the least important of the eleven ideas for advancing in their careers, which infers they believe that what is within their control can make a difference. About half of those surveyed consider a mentor very important to career success, but the younger half does not. Since nearly all who have studied promotions of professionals, including the authors,

believe in the importance of a mentor, young professionals who yearn for advancing in their careers must be advised of the impact of mentors on their careers.

The authors have highlighted what most of us will have to do to get promoted. It boils down to loving what we are doing and understanding that enjoying the journey to the top may often be more exciting than being at the top. Good Luck!

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