

# Promotion Panels: Exploring the Promotion Process<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Promotion is a frequently discussed topic among Commissioned Corps officers. There are many questions surrounding the process of developing a promotion package and how

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<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: The comments and advice provided in this document are based mostly on the panelists’ views, opinions, and perceptions surrounding the promotion process. The mentoring subcommittee incorporated references to current promotion advice documents (e.g., the scientist benchmarks) to provide clarity to the panelists’ comments and observations.

<sup>2</sup> Support also provided by CDR Matthew Newland

the package is evaluated. Often, officers turn to mentors for guidance on how to prepare a successful promotion package. Thus, mentorship plays a significant role in a successful career and in promotion. In May 2015, an initiative was launched to identify ways to more actively engage mentors in the mentorship relationship, and to provide mentors with tools to assist them in their role. Through discussions within the mentorship subcommittee, it was recognized that many mentors may have been promoted during a time when promotion success rates were much higher than current success rates. The subcommittee identified a need to develop guidance that mentors could use, in addition to their own experience and previously provided guidance, to help their mentees through the promotion process. This guidance document will reflect the experiences and insights of officers who have been recently promoted. The findings and discussion reported herein are intended to be used as an adjunct to already available promotion information provided on the CCMIS website.

The most obvious and effective way to provide information on recent promotion experiences was to talk to officers who were successfully promoted within the last few years. Thus, the idea for Promotion Panels originated. In 2016, panels were held consisting of officers promoted to TO-5 in 2013, 2014, and 2015. The results of these panels were reported to the SciPAC Executive Board in the form of a written report in the Fall of 2015. The results were shared with all of SciPAC via a presentation after the November SciPAC call and in an article in the Winter 2016 SciPAC newsletter.

Similar to the decline in the success rate for TO-5 officers, the success rate for promotion to TO-6 has also declined in recent years, from 25% historically to 20% in 2014 through 2016<sup>3</sup>. From February 2017 through April 2017, five panels of officers promoted to TO-6 in 2014, 2015, and 2016 were held. Panels were held for officers promoted on exceptional proficiency promotions (EPP), officers promoted on their first attempt, and officers promoted on subsequent attempts. Additionally, several officers provided written responses and one officer was interviewed individually. The breakdown for panel participation is as follows:

- 19 officers were promoted in years under review
- 18 officers agreed to participate; 17 officers fully participated, either in a panel discussion or by providing written responses
  - Four officers were promoted by EPP
  - Nine officers were promoted on their first attempt
  - Five officers were promoted on subsequent attempts<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Though no officers from the 2017 Promotion year were included in the panels, the success rate is noted as declining to 18%, a further drop from the past three years.

<sup>4</sup> One officer was not successful on a first attempt as EPP, but was successful on a second attempt.

- Billet held at time of promotion:
  - 16 officers held O-6 billets (11 were supervisory billets)
  - Two officers held O-5 (supervisory) billets
- Noted affiliations and disciplines:
  - Eight epidemiologists
  - Six psychologists
  - Seven indicated duty station was CDC
  - Nine indicated duty station was DoD
  - One officer each at DHS and FDA<sup>5</sup>

The panels were held by teleconference, with 2-3 officers and 2-3 subcommittee members participating in each panel.

A list of questions was developed which formed the basis of the discussion. The questions covered several topics, including:

- Reasons for a successful promotion
- Deployments
- Awards
- Achievements
- Supervisor support
- Leadership activities, including SciPAC involvement
- Mentorship
- CV, OS, and ROS content

After the conclusion of the final panel, all notes were compiled and the results evaluated. Statistics are noted where possible in this document. However, since each panel held was a unique experience, not all data was recorded for every panel and each panelist (e.g. some missing data may include such questions as highest award at time of promotion or if billet was supervisory). Therefore, such quantifications are given in terms of the numbers that are available and may not add up to the total number of panelists that participated. Even with these limitations, there was a great deal of qualitative and quantitative information obtained from the Promotion Panels. This document presents the findings of the subcommittee from the Promotion Panels.

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<sup>5</sup> Since it is not known what duty stations officers not promoted were posted to, it is difficult to conclude that there is an advantage as to the duty station, even though it might appear to be the case. Also, this is a snapshot of three promotion years. A larger analysis is needed to address subjects such as the impact of assignment on promotion success.

## Promotion Panel Topics and Discussion Results

### Qualifications Reflected in Promotion Package

The panel discussion explored the similarity and differences in positions and qualifications that the officers reflected in their promotion packages. Topics included the importance of being in a supervisory billet, the nature of the position (e.g. basic research, applied research, field research, regulatory, clinical, or other), and publication history.

More than 75% of all officers (13 of 17) were in supervisory billets at the time of promotion success. Two officers stated they showed leadership in other ways, such as being a recognized subject matter expert and being very visible with publications. Two officers stated they were previously in supervisory positions but were not in supervisory roles at the time of promotion success. One of three officers who were promoted during a subsequent attempt changed positions and was in a supervisory role during their successful attempt. Supervisory positions were viewed as a favorable attribute for promotion amongst the panels. Out of nine officers who directly answered the question, one officer felt having a supervisory position was required, five thought it was very important, and three thought it was important for promotion. One officer stated that having a supervisory billet at some point during a career is a way to show leadership and may be a requirement for promotion success. For officers not promoted on their first attempt, of three officers that were successful upon a subsequent promotion attempt, only one had a change in position during the process. However, holding a non-supervisory position did not appear to negatively affect promotion success, as all five officers who held non-supervisory billets at the time of promotion were either promoted on an EPP or on their first scheduled attempt<sup>4</sup>.

When it came to describing the nature of their position and work, the majority of officers had a difficult time describing their role within one or two descriptors. Eight of 15 officers described their role with multiple descriptors. Program management, administrative, policy development, or regulatory roles were described by 11 officers. Epidemiology or research as a primary role was described by six officers. The term clinical was described by three officers.

With regard to publication, nearly 90% of officers (15 out of 17) reported that they publish scientific-based data. Some officers stated that they published earlier on in their career and now are more likely to be a co-author. Two officers specifically mentioned that publishing was not a required function of their position, but they sought out opportunities to support their missions or communicate interesting findings. Officers also demonstrated their scientific findings through presentations, program proposals, book chapters, or publishing entire books.

## Leadership and Achievements- Contribution to Promotion

The Promotion Panel discussion next focused on activities and accomplishments that were not directly related to duty place assignments. These could include activities in SciPAC, COA, or other service organizations. All officers (17 of 17) were active in committees, subcommittees, and/or working groups at the time of O-6 promotion. Most officers cited involvement with SciPAC or PsyPAG, but there were also a few involved in other committees (not specified). Most officers (94%) led, chaired, or co-chaired a subcommittee or working group within the organization (n=17). One officer was not a lead but was a significant contributor to the respective organization(s). Seven officers perceived involvement in these organizations as being very important or required, another seven thought it was very important, and three officers believed it was important (n=17).

Other relevant comments related to participation in committees, subcommittees, and/or working groups included:

- Officers perceived participation in SciPAC to be a priority. Some officers observed that being a SciPAC voting member can help in demonstrating commitment to the category. One officer thought it was beneficial to show participation overtime. Participation in SciPAC was also perceived by some as being the best use of time.
- Participation in these organizations was perceived to be good for networking, mentorship, volunteer opportunities, and name recognition.
- At least one officer mentioned the need to be recognized by SciPAC (SciPAC awards).
- At least one officer thought that committee involvement does not need to come from SciPAC but that the boards look at active participation as a whole in all Corps groups.
- At least one officer mentioned the need to balance PHS activities and your job; job should be your priority.

## Award History and Impact

Awards are a tangible way to demonstrate accomplishments. Discussion included the type and number of awards, including the number of individual, unit, response, and service awards. Awards included not only those issued by Commissioned Corps but also other organizations, including COA, PAC, and Agency awards. The panelists had a varied award background, possessing anywhere from a handful to numerous individual and unit awards. They also had a range of other awards, including response and service awards, though those were not thought to have played as significant a role in promotion compared to individual and unit awards.

The majority of panelists considered awards to be required for promotion, and the rest indicated that they were important for promotion. Generally, the level of the awards was considered significant, primarily because of the published benchmarks, though some officers were unsure of the importance of the level of awards. At least one officer mentioned that you should have recent awards when up for promotion, and show a history of awards through your career. Awards from too long ago or awards received only right before promotion does not convey the career long progression that might be desirable from a promotion board's perspective. Also, one officer noted that they had difficulty getting awards approved through the Commissioned Corps that would have been easily approved in DoD. Other items of note:

- Officers reported as few as two individual awards to as many as six individual awards over their career
- Officers reported as few as one UC and no OUC to as many as 20 UC and six OUC over their career
- Twelve officers held a OSM, the benchmark award, at the time of promotion
- Three officers did not have a OSM, but had a CM (one or two) at the time of promotion, and thus did not meet that benchmark
- Two officers held a MSM (both from DoD); a MSM from DOD is equivalent to a OSM from PHS

## COERs and Supervisory Support

The panelists were then asked to discuss what their perceptions were with regard to the importance and impact of the annual COER as well as support from their supervisor. All officers responded that a strong COER was required for successful promotion. They went on further to indicate that getting mostly "7s" is very important (n=13) or required (n=3). At least one officer said that you need to have all "7s" when you are up for promotion. However, several officers commented that the narrative must support the scores and that promotion boards might look at scores differently if they were completed by the same supervisor year after year or by different supervisors. Another comment made was that the officer and supervisor should incorporate language into the narratives that reflects the benchmarks. The panelists also recommend working with civilian supervisors to educate them about the importance of the COER, the true-meaning of the scores, and, if the supervisor is amenable, assist with writing and or editing of the narrative. Finally, one officer thought promotion boards should be aware and take into consideration that some agencies and supervisors may routinely avoid higher scores.

With regard to supervisory support, a majority of panelists (10) indicated that this was required for success in addressing the benchmarks. The remaining panelists indicated that it was either very important (4) or important (2) (total n=16). It was also noted that

the difference between having a civilian and Commissioned Corps supervisor can be significant. Panelists gave a number of ways in which supervisors had been supportive, including:

- Helping the officer to recognize other opportunities
- Assisting with writing a strong COER
- Recognizing the importance and significance of the officer's contributions and helping to promote the officer based on this recognition
- Allowing for officers to deploy
- Supporting awards for accomplishments
- Supporting PHS activities

## CV Content and Preparation

As one officer succinctly described, the OS and the ROS are two [partial] stories and the CV contains the full story. Half of the officers who responded recommended the strategy to start early and spend time putting together one's documents, awards, COERs, OS, ROS, CV, and CV summary sheet. Sixteen out of the 17 officers had their CV reviewed. Many of the officers had multiple people review their CV and other promotion documents, ranging from using the SciPAC Career Development Subcommittee's annual CV review process, SciPAC matched mentor, another PHS officer and other mentors and friends. Additionally:

- Six panelists emphasized using simple language, be clear and concise, and highlight numbers/impact in the CV.
- Many panelists felt it was very helpful to have a reviewer from outside their agency or outside the Scientist category.
- Three panelists stated to maximize use of the two-page CV Summary Sheet and write good descriptions-such as meeting benchmarks, based on the belief that the promotion board is unlikely to have time to review every candidate's CV in detail.
- One panelist stated to review the guidance documents and follow the recommended format.
- A couple of officers indicated that they used the CV as one component to convey the "story" or their career and accomplishments

## Mentorship

All officers on the panel agreed that mentorship was an important factor in promotion success. Some had formal mentoring agreements through SciPAC at the time of promotion, and others had informal mentoring relationships with co-workers or other officers. Of the respondents indicating specific mentoring relationships, 45% of the officers had formal SciPAC mentors (5 of 11); however, all had either informal SciPAC mentors or other informal mentors (from other categories, from their Agency, friends, etc.). Of the 11 officers that directly commented on the importance of mentorship for promotion success, two officers (18%) thought that having a mentor was important, five officers (45%) thought it was very important, and 4 officers (36%) thought it was required. Additionally, many were actively mentoring junior officers, and this experience may have contributed to their promotion success, as mentoring is a benchmark. Some of the advice provided by their mentors included:

- Become a mentor; show your support to the category and the PHS.
- Learn how to write about what you do, write well, and communicate and highlight impact.
- No matter what rank you are, strive for the highest benchmarks.
- Look at your competition. You know who you are up against and you know what they are good at (how active they are).
- Several officers (if not most) had other senior officers look over their promotion materials and provide honest feedback and advice.

## Deployments

All officers had participated in a deployment, either through their agency or through PHS. The number of deployments range from 1 to over 50, with a median of three and an average 7.7 deployments. The officer who reported over 50 deployments included agency temporary duty assignments<sup>6</sup>. On average officers had participated in an average of 2.5 (median = 2) PHS deployments and an average of 5.4 (median = 1) agency deployments. Some officers reported that some positions and some agencies are more likely to deploy officers through temporary duty assignments. Of those officers that were successful upon subsequent attempts, they reported no changes in deployment counts between attempts. A few officers stated they also included their prior service deployment experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> There is some lack of clarity in guidance as to what qualifies as a deployment through an Agency. Therefore, officers may not be consistent in the reporting of deployments, with some officers considering an assignment or TDY as a deployment while others having the same type of assignment not reporting it as a deployment.

All officers felt deployments contributed to promotion success. One officer felt deployments were required, while all other officers felt deployments were either important or very important for promotion success. Some officers mentioned deployments were an additional avenue to demonstrate how their work has an impact on public health. Twelve out of 15 officers were a part of a deployment team when they were selected to deploy with PHS. Of those that were not part of a deployment team, two officers mentioned they were considered mission critical and one officer stated they were selected before the establishment of deployment teams.

Six of nine officers who commented on the importance of deployments thought that agency deployments may be viewed differently by the promotion board when compared to PHS deployments. The other three officers were unsure if there was a difference in the perception of agency and PHS deployments. One officer stated that agency deployments are often a part of an officer's regular job while PHS deployments are often completely unrelated to an officer's position. Some officers lamented that the agency deployment opportunities were limited in their agencies. At least two officers mentioned that it was important to explain the public health impacts of deployments and how their role contributed to the success of the mission. One officer felt it was critical to highlight participation in a wide range of public health missions. Additionally, one officer felt it was critical to show readiness and willingness to participate in public health disasters.

More than 85% of officers (six of seven) felt that all PHS deployments were not viewed similarly by the promotion board. One officer felt that longer deployments demonstrated "more of a commitment" to a mission. All six officers who specifically addressed the perception about domestic and international deployments felt international deployments were more prestigious when viewed by promotion boards.

## Mobility

Panelists were also asked to describe their history of mobility and their opinion of the impact on their promotion success. On average officers experienced more than three moves during their career (average 3.3 moves; n=15). Approximately half of all the officers (6 of 13) reported they had not experienced a geographical move (some of the officers did not mention geographic mobility). Of those that did move geographically in their career, five of seven moved once and two moved twice. The average number of programmatic moves per officer was 2.7 moves. Some officers also mentioned they documented the geographic and programmatic moves during prior active duty service. Only one officer changed positions during subsequent promotion attempts and the move was a programmatic move.

The officer's opinions varied on the importance of moves during the course of a career. It was generally accepted that an officer should demonstrate increasing levels of responsibility and leadership but some officers mentioned that their specialization either made it easier or more difficult for mobility. Some sort of mobility was viewed as a requirement by three officers, very important by four officers, important by four officers, and possibly not very important by three officers (n=14).

### **Continuing Education**

The majority of interviewed officers had minimal comments regarding the impact of continuing education on promotion. All the officers stated that continuing education credits/units (CEUs) need to be maintained, but about half of the officers who responded felt it is only to meet the benchmark, that the value is quantity and not so much quality/content. One officer stated the need for CEU to maintain licensure.

### **Officer Statement and Reviewing Officer Statement**

The Officer's and Reviewing Officer's Statements (OS, ROS) are required documents for an officer's promotion package. Panelists were asked what information they included in their OS and ROS and how this compared to the information included in their CV. The majority of the officers who responded stated there was overlap between their OS and ROS, but with a different emphasis on the same highlights. Many of the panelists remarked on the need to align descriptions in the OS to the benchmarks. The panelists generally agreed that the ROS focused on the impact of the officer's accomplishments, how the officer's accomplishments contribute to the Agency's success, and the leadership and promotion potential of the officer. Approximately two-thirds of the officers drafted the ROS for his/her Reviewing Official (RO) to edit and finalize or worked very closely with their RO to develop the ROS. Additional comments from panelists are included below.

- Other highlights mentioned to be included in the OS were demonstrating officership, accomplishments, demonstrating leadership and increasing responsibility, and participation in activities in SciPAC or PHS.
- One panelist described the OS and ROS as the narrative to the CV, telling your story.
- One panelist stated having original content (non-duplicative) in the OS and ROS in order to maximize the opportunity to highlight accomplishments.
- Three panelists felt the OS had low or the least value, compared to the ROS, COER and CV.

## Expected Comments Regarding Promotion Process

As one would predict, discussions of the panelists included much information consistent with the already available guidance on promotion. However, it is useful to reiterate this information as it is certainly important and represents a synopsis of the information already provided in this report. Panelists reported that supervisors were generally supportive, with very few examples of issues with supervisory support. Many of these were similar to those noted in the panels of O-5 officers conducted in 2016. Common points raised through the panels that were expected included:

- Prepare early; be familiar with and strive to achieve the benchmarks; document benchmarks clearly
- Highlight leadership experience, including growth throughout your career
- Demonstrate impact that leads to scientific and public health advances
- Have others review your promotion materials
- Find a good mentor, and the earlier the better
- Visibility in SciPAC is important
- Be proactive in your career
- Quantify where possible; include dollars or hours saved or spent and the impact of that
- Build your network, and use the resources in your network for feedback and guidance
- Focus on CV coversheet- make sure it is perfect; full CV should support the coversheet
- Performance in your position is most important
- Use others that have been successful as examples, including how they presented what they do and how they demonstrated impact and importance
- It's a marathon not a sprint!

## Unexpected Comments Regarding Promotion Process

Additionally, when reviewing the comments from all of the panelists, there were many comments that the promotion panel found to be unexpected and/or significant:

- Don't expect to get promoted on first try; it may take multiple attempts to be successful
- Don't worry too much- don't second guess yourself
- Focus on your strengths and don't try to do everything

- Demonstrate your overall depth as an officer
- Seek out impactful PHS activities
- Make sure your promotion materials are clearly understandable to those outside your agency and field of specialization; one panelist said use terms that you would use to explain your job to a grandparent
- Use all the parts of the promotion package to “tell your story”
- Some officers had not documented letters of appreciation or certificates in eOPF in many years; one officer mentioned that “letters of appreciation can clutter the eOPF”
- Create an award strategy early in your career so that you can hit the benchmark awards for each promotion milestone
- Strive for the balance between quality and quantity- fewer impactful bullets on a CV coversheet are more important than more less impactful bullets
- Strive to hit all the benchmarks and more- assume that your competition has checked the boxes several times over
- Understanding the scoring system is very frustrating since the process is not well understood and doesn’t seem consistent

## Conclusion

As a follow-up to the promotion panels held during 2016 interviewing officers recently promoted to TO-5, panels were held with TO-6 officers in the spring of 2017. These officers were promoted to TO-6 in 2014, 2015, and 2016. Many comments made by O-5 officers during the panels in 2016 were similar to those made by O-6 officers during the panels summarized herein. In both groups, there were some insights and observations that would be expected as they follow the generally available guidance; however, in each case panelists provided insightful comments that were not generally communicated in existing documents.

However, looking at the statistics between the two groups (O-5 and O-6 officers) there are some stark contrasts: For O-5, more officers were promoted on subsequent attempts than were promoted after only one attempt. For O-6 officers, the opposite was true. A majority (64%) were promoted either as EPP or on their first attempt. Of the remaining officers, all except one were promoted on their second attempt (the remaining officer was promoted on their third attempt). Therefore, it seems that chance of successful promotion drops significantly if not promoted the first time, and becomes quite difficult if not successful after two attempts. Also, a higher majority of the successfully promoted O-6 officers possessed the benchmark individual award (OSM for O-6) than in the group of O-5 officers who responded (with CM being the benchmark award for O-5). Leadership was also noted as particularly important at the O-6 level. Many of the successfully

promoted O-6 officers had been Chair of SciPAC or PysPAG, or had other prominent leadership roles in these groups. While a majority of the officers promoted to O-6 were in supervisory roles (72%) there were a few who were not in a supervisory role, but had demonstrated expertise in their scientific or programmatic area. Additionally, both groups of officers stressed the importance of career planning and mentoring for a successful and rewarding career.

In closing, much was gleaned from the intimate panels of officers promoted during 2013-2016, to TO-5 and TO-6. While there was some frustration shared about the process and their experiences, officers generally had a great deal of excellent advice to share. There was an expression by some of the panelists that part of success was due to luck, and the process was not fully transparent. However, they also stressed the importance of preparation and demonstrating impact in the promotion package. All of the officers that participated did so enthusiastically and their contributions are recognized and appreciated.